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The book of wilderness

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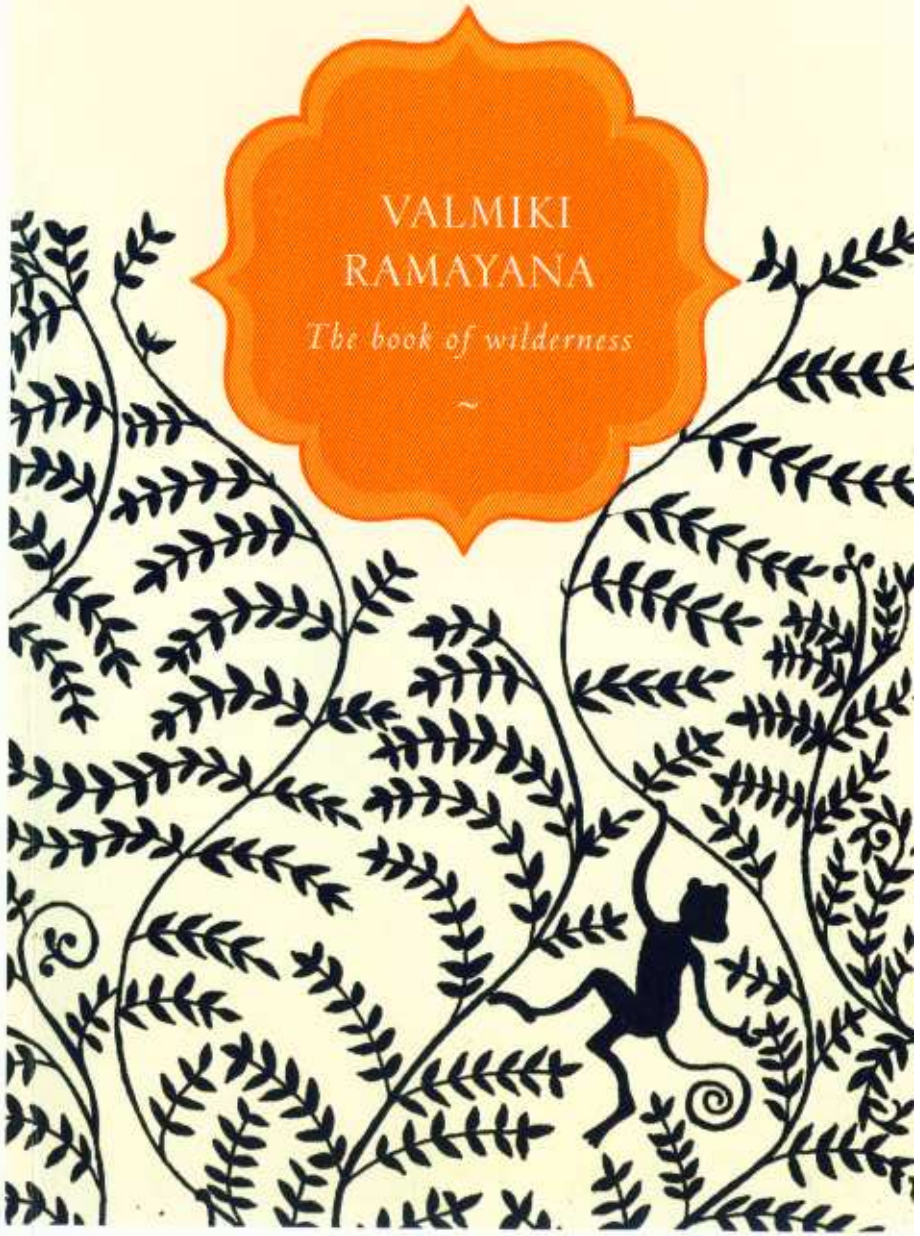

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Vālmīki is almost indisputably the author of the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* even though it is quite likely that the story of Rama's life was in circulation before Vālmīki gave it its present form. As a poet and composer, Vālmīki acts within the story that he tells. Later legend has it that Vālmīki was a bandit who was converted from his life of looting and pillaging by Rāma's grace. His devotion then inspired him to compose and recite the story of Rāma's adventures. While it is impossible to establish conclusive dates for Vālmīki's life and there is nothing outside the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself to prove that he was a historical figure, it is believed that this Sanskrit text was composed between 700 and 500 BC.

Arshia Sattar has a PhD from the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. Her areas of interest are Indian epics, mythology and the story traditions of the subcontinent. Her articles appear in various national newspapers and magazines. Her translation of *Tales from the Kathāsaritasāgara* was published by Penguin in 1995.

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Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa

The Book of Wilderness

Translated and abridged by ARSHIA SATTAR

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one

When Rāma entered the mighty Daṇḍaka forest, he saw that it was inhabited by deer and various other animals, including bears and tigers. The trees in the forest had been enveloped by enormous creepers and vines and none of its ponds and lakes had been looked after. The birds were silent and the only sound that filled the air was the chirping of crickets.

In that forest which was the home of all kinds of fierce animals, Rāma came upon a huge *rākṣasa* who fed on human flesh. The *rākṣasa*, with his sunken eyes and huge maw, roared like thunder. His limbs were twisted and deformed, his huge belly quivered and shook when he moved and he was terrifying to look at. This awful creature, who wore a tiger skin dripping with blood and fat, tormented all the forest animals. He had three lions, four tigers, two wolves, ten deer and an elephant's head, it's tusk still smeared with gore, impaled upon the point of his spear as he came rushing towards Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā.

Looking like Death, the *rākṣasa* charged at them and his roar made the earth tremble. He grabbed Sītā and tucked her under his arm. 'You are in the forest with the

matted hair of an ascetic. But you have brought your wife with you!' he shouted. 'Consider your life at an end! You have entered the Daṇḍaka forest armed with bows and arrows! How can you live an ascetic's life when you have a woman with you? Who are you, unrighteous men, who malign the life led by the great sages?

'I am the *rākṣasa* Virādha. Every day, I wander through this dense forest preying on sages and eating their flesh. This beautiful woman shall be my wife! And I shall drink the blood of both you wretched creatures on the battlefield!' Sītā trembled like a slender banana plant in a high wind when she heard the *rākṣasa's* terrible words.

'Look, Lakṣmaṇa,' said Rāma, his face pale as he saw his wife under the *rākṣasa's* arm. 'This beautiful princess, the delicate daughter of Janaka and my lovely wife, who has been reared with every comfort imaginable, is being forced to sit on Virādha's hip. What Kaikeyī wished for when she asked for her boons has come to pass all too soon! Not satisfied with the kingdom for her own son, she sent me, whom everybody loves, into the forest. That mother of mine has been granted her wish today! I cannot bear the thought of Sītā being touched by another man. It upsets me more than the death of my father and the loss of my kingdom!'

Rāma broke into tears as he said this but Lakṣmaṇa was enraged and burst out, hissing in his anger, 'Rāma! You are Indra's equal and the lord of all creatures! How can you act so helpless! You have nothing to fear when I am at your service. I shall kill this *rākṣasa* with my arrows and the earth shall drink his blood. I shall direct the anger that I feel for Bharata over the loss of the kingdom towards

this creature, just as Indra turned his anger upon the mountains. My mighty arms shall release an arrow with great force. May it drive the breath from his body and leave him lifeless upon the ground!'

'Who are you and where are you going?' asked Virādha in a voice that filled the entire forest. 'Tell me, I must know!' Rāma replied that they were from the Ikṣvāku clan. 'We are virtuous kṣatriyas who have come to spend some time in the forest. Who are you and why do you wander through this forest?' he asked the *rākṣasa* who blazed like a fire.

'Is that what you want to know?' said Virādha. 'Listen, then, and I will tell you! I am the son of Jaya and my mother is Śatahṛdā. I am known to all the *rākṣasas* on earth as Virādha. Brahmā gave me a boon because of all the austerities I performed. There is no weapon on earth that can maim, cut or pierce me! Leave this woman with me and go from this place with no further expectations. Return to where you came from. I shall not kill you!'

Rāma's eyes blazed with anger as he shouted back at the *rākṣasa* who had bloodshot eyes and wicked intentions. 'Shame on you for your base motives! You are obviously seeking death. Stand and fight with me and you shall certainly find it!' Rāma fitted his straightest and sharpest arrows into his bow. Seven gold-tipped arrows blazed like tongues of flame as they flew with the speed of the wind, resounding through the air. They pierced the *rākṣasa's* body and he fell to the earth. Virādha let out a deafening roar. He seemed like death with his mouth wide open and his spear that was as huge as Indra's flagstaff. Rāma, the best among all those who fight with weapons, split Virādha's

spear with two arrows as it came through the air like a thunderbolt. Then, Lakṣmaṇa quickly cut off his right arm and Rāma his left one.

The *rākṣasa*, who was as dark as a cloud, fell to the earth with his arms hacked off, like a mountain felled by a thunderbolt. 'I knew that you were Rāma, the illustrious son of Kausalyā, and that this was the virtuous Sītā and that the famous Lakṣmaṇa,' said Virādha to the brothers. 'I am actually the *gandharva* Tumburu. I have this hideous *rākṣasa* body because I was cursed by Kubera. When I begged his forgiveness, he generously said I would be liberated when Rāma, son of Daśaratha, killed me in combat, and I would recover my natural state and return to heaven.

'Now I have been freed from this awful curse by you. I shall return to my own home. May all go well with you! The great sage Śarabhanga lives close by, less than one and a half *yojanās* from here. He is as effulgent as the sun. Go to him quickly, for he shall ensure your welfare. As for me, throw me into a pit. That is the primordial ritual for a dying *rākṣasa*. Those who are buried in pits shall attain worlds of everlasting happiness.' Virādha was overcome with pain from his wounds as he spoke. He was ready to go to heaven, waiting only to be released from his body. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa hurled him into a deep pit and the *rākṣasa* with ears like conch shells howled as he fell.

Now that they had recovered Sītā and the incident with the *rākṣasa* was behind them, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa went deeper into the forest with their golden arrows, shining like the sun and the moon in the sky.

Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā visited the settlements of many sages in the forest, including the hermitages of Śarabhanga and Sutīkṣṇa. Wherever he went, the sages pleaded with Rāma to protect them from the harassment of the *rākṣasas*. Rāma promised that he would kill any and all the *rākṣasas* who bothered the sages.

When Rāma had said farewell to Sutīkṣṇa and they were proceeding on their way, Sītā spoke gently to her husband. 'You are a man of great deeds and when you consider the matter carefully, I am sure you will see that *dharma* is very subtle.

'There are three major weaknesses that arise from desire. One is telling lies. The other two are much worse: one is lusting after another man's wife and the other is cruelty without a justified cause for hostility. You have never lied, Rāma, nor will you ever do so. You do not covet the wives of others and you have not acted in violation of *dharma*. These things would only be done by a man who has no control over his senses. I know you are perfectly disciplined.

'But the third weakness which men succumb to because of their passions, the inflicting of violence and cruelty upon other beings without reason or enmity, that weakness appears to be present in you now. You have promised to kill the *rākṣasas* in combat in order to protect the sages who live in the Daṇḍaka forest. This has brought you and your brother to this forest, armed with your bows and arrows.

'It disturbs me a great deal when I see you like this. I know you well and I am concerned about your welfare now and in the future. Our journey into the Daṇḍaka forest

makes me anxious and I am not comfortable. Listen and I will tell you why.

'Now that you are here with your brother and both of you are armed, you shall see many forest creatures. Inevitably, you will be tempted to use your arrows. Like dry fuel bursts into flame when it is near a fire, so too, a kṣatriya's passions are ignited when he has a bow at hand.

'Long ago, there was an ascetic who lived somewhere in a forest which was filled with birds and animals who dwelt together in peace. But Indra wanted to place obstacles in the path of the ascetic's practise of austerities. So one day he took the form of a soldier and carrying a sword, he went to see the ascetic. He left the sword with the ascetic for safe-keeping and went away. Once he had the weapon, the ascetic guarded it zealously. He even took it with him when he wandered through the forest searching for roots and fruits, determined to guard what had been entrusted to him. That man who had been known for his ascetic merit renounced his ascetic vows and his mind turned to cruelty. He began to relish brutality and he fell into unrighteous ways. Eventually, that holy man went to hell, all because of his proximity to a weapon.

'I am reminding you of this tale not because I presume to instruct you but because I love and respect you. May it never happen that you attack the *rākṣasas* of the forest without reason, simply because you carry a weapon. I cannot bear the thought of innocents being killed, O hero! A kṣatriya should use his bow in the forest only to protect the oppressed. What a difference there is between the life of weapons and that of the forest, between the vows of a kṣatriya and those of an ascetic! We must learn to respect

the code of behaviour of the world we now inhabit. Here, the mind is perverted by extreme proximity to weapons. You can return to the code of the kṣatriyas when we go back to Ayodhyā!

'But if you were to give up the kingdom entirely and embrace the life of an ascetic, I am sure that my parents-in-law would be very happy. Everything in this world, including wealth and happiness, come from *dharma*. There is nothing greater than *dharma*. Great men strive for *dharma* by subjecting themselves to severe physical mortifications, since true happiness cannot come from the pursuit of pleasure.

'Enjoy the beauties of the forest with a pure mind, my love. You already know all there is to be known in the three worlds about these things. I have spoken from the foolishness of being a woman. Who is capable of teaching you anything about *dharma*? Discuss what I have said with your brother and then do whatever you think best.'

'My dear, you have spoken sweetly for my benefit because you love me,' said Rāma who always stood firm in *dharma*. 'Your words show that you are truly worthy of your noble family. But I must remind you of what you yourself said, that kṣatriyas are armed so that the cries of the oppressed may never be heard. Those resolute sages who live in the forest are being tormented. They are the refuge of other beings, and yet they are the ones who approached me for protection. They live quietly in the forest, eating only roots and fruits, intent on practising their *dharma*. But they can no longer live in peace because of the *rākṣasas*' wicked deeds.

'The sages live in the forest all through the year,

practising austerities, but they are preyed upon by man-eating *rākṣasas*. The sages approached me of their own accord. The best among them spoke to me and I was deeply embarrassed. "Forgive me," I said. "I am truly ashamed that people like yourselves, whom I should be serving, have had to come to me." I asked them what they wanted me to do. In one voice they replied, "Rāma, we are being horribly harassed by the *rākṣasas* who live in the Daṇḍaka forest and who can change their shapes at will. You must protect us from their attacks. They descend upon us when we are performing sacrifices. These wretched carrion-eaters assault us during the time of the new moon and the full moon. You are the only refuge for these tormented sages! Of course, we could easily destroy them with the power of our austerities. But we would be nullifying our long years of penance by doing so. Austerities are so difficult and there are so many obstacles in our way in any case! So even though the *rākṣasas* harass us, we do not curse them. You and your brother must help us. We have no other protector in the forest!"

'I promised the sages of the Daṇḍaka forest that I would protect them, Sītā. And now that I have given them my word, I cannot go back on it as long as there is a single breath left in my body. You know that truth is dear to me! I could more easily give up my life or renounce you or Lakṣmaṇa than break a promise, especially one that I have made to brahmins! It is my duty to protect holy men under any circumstances. Now it is even more so because they have asked for my protection.

'I am glad you said what you did, for you spoke out of love. We never give advice to those we do not care for.

Dear girl, your words were typical of your noble character and your family background!'

Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā wandered through the forest pleasantly, spending time with the many sages there, and finally arrived at the settlement of the great *ṛṣi* Agastya. Lakṣmaṇa went up to one of Agastya's students. 'The eldest son of King Daśaratha, mighty Rāma, has arrived here with his wife Sītā and wishes to meet the great sage. I am his younger brother Lakṣmaṇa. You may have heard about us. I am devoted to Rāma and committed to doing what will make him happy. We are here in this terrible forest because of our father's wishes. Tell the sage we would like to see him.'

The student went into the ritual chamber to announce Rāma's arrival to the sage whose power from austerities was truly awesome. 'The sons of Daśaratha, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, have come here along with Rāma's wife Sītā,' said the student, repeating Lakṣmaṇa's words. 'They wish to see you and serve you. What shall I tell them?'

'How wonderful that Rāma has come to see me!' exclaimed the resplendent sage. 'I have waited a long time for him to come here. Why did you not let them enter immediately? Go quickly and bring him in! Show all due respect to him, his brother and his wife.' The student bowed and went out to do the sage's bidding. 'Where is Rāma?' he asked Lakṣmaṇa eagerly. 'He must go in at once and meet the sage!'

Lakṣmaṇa led the student to the settlement gates and pointed Rāma and Sītā out to him. With great respect, the student repeated Agastya's words to Rāma and escorted him and Sītā in with full honours. Rāma walked through

the settlement and saw that it was filled with tame deer. He also noticed that there were shrines dedicated to the worship of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Indra, the Sun, the Moon, Bhaga, Kubera, Dhatṛ, Vidhat and Vāyu.

Rāma looked up and saw the great sage, blazing with splendour, surrounded by his students and disciples, coming forward to greet him. 'Look, Lakṣmaṇa! That must be Agastya coming towards us. I assume that it is he because of the shining aura that surrounds him.' Filled with joy, Rāma prostrated himself at the feet of the sage who shone like the sun, and honoured him. Then he stood to one side with Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā, his palms joined in reverence. Agastya accepted Rāma's homage and welcomed him with the traditional *arghya* ritual. He asked after his welfare and offered him a seat. The sage made offerings to the fire and treated Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā as honoured guests, plying them with food that was appropriate for ascetics.

'Rāma, this bow decorated with gold and jewels belonged to Viṣṇu and was made for him by Viśvakarmā. This arrow, best of all arrows, was given to me by Brahmā. It shines like the sun and never misses its mark. And these inexhaustible quivers were given to me by Indra along with this mighty gold-hilted sword in this exquisite sheath. Long ago, Viṣṇu used this bow to kill the *asuras* and recapture power for the gods. Take these weapons from me and use them to vanquish your enemies as Indra uses the thunderbolt!' said Agastya as he handed the weapons to Rāma.

'May good fortune attend you always, Rāma,' continued the sage. 'I am very pleased that you came to

see me with Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā. You must be tired from your long, arduous journey. I can see that Sītā is completely exhausted. This poor woman has never experienced hardships like those of the forest. She has come to this troubled place out of love for her husband. Make sure that she has a pleasant life here, Rāma, for she has braved a great deal to follow you. It is in the nature of women to stay with a husband while he is prosperous and comfortable and to leave him in times of adversity. Women have the impetuosity of lightning, the sharpness of a weapon and the whimsy of the wind. But your wife, Rāma, is free from all these faults. She is praiseworthy and as fine an example as the steadfast Arundhatī herself. Her presence will adorn any place you choose to live in with Lakṣmaṇa.'

'It is our good fortune, blessed one and giver of boons, that you are pleased with us because of our virtues,' replied Rāma humbly. 'Tell me of a place where we can settle down and live in peace, a place that is gently wooded and has abundant water.'

Agastya thought for a while and then spoke with deliberation. 'About two *yojanās* from here, there is a place abundant in roots and fruits and water, filled with different kinds of animals. It is called Pañcavaṭī. Go and establish a settlement there with Lakṣmaṇa so that you can fulfil your father's wishes with relative ease. I know all that happened to you and Daśaratha, blameless Rāma, through the power of my austerities and because of my affection for you. When you said you wanted to live here in the forest, I thought about your motives and now I understand what you have in mind. That is why I have asked you to live in Pañcavaṭī.

It is a pleasant place and it is close to the river Godāvarī. Sītā will like it there. It is quiet and deserted and is a place of great sanctity.

'Rāma, your wife is with you and I know you are capable of looking after her. But, by living there, you will also be able to protect the sages. Do you see that grove of *mahua* trees? Walk left from there and you will come to another grove of banyans. Go up the mountain and you will see Pañcavaṭī with its perennially flowering trees.'

Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā said their farewells to the sage who was devoted to truth and prostrated themselves at his feet. He blessed them and the three set off. Armed with their bows and arrows, the two princes who were so courageous in battle went along the path the sage had indicated, heading for Pañcavaṭī.

Soon, they came to an area that was full of terrifying serpents and many kinds of deer. 'This must be the place to which Agastya meant to send us,' said Rāma to his brother Lakṣmaṇa who blazed like the fire. 'This must be Pañcavaṭī, since it is so pleasant with its flowering trees. You know so much about forests. Look around and find a spot that will please us, where we can build our settlement. Find a place with water close by, from where we can enjoy the beautiful view, where sacrificial materials and flowers will be close at hand.'

'Rāma, I am your servant, even if you live for a hundred years!' said Lakṣmaṇa with his palms joined. 'You pick the spot and show it to me.' Rāma was pleased with Lakṣmaṇa's words and soon found a spot that met all his requirements. Taking Lakṣmaṇa's hands in his own, he said, 'This is the perfect spot, surrounded as it is by

flowering trees. Build the hut here, dear brother! Look, there is a pond close by that shines like the sun and is filled with fragrant lotuses! And there is the river Godāvarī, just as the sage described it, lined with trees, visited by swans and all kinds of song birds. The mountains dotted with caves are neither too close nor too far. Deer wander there amidst the trees laden with flowers and we can hear the cries of the peacocks! This spot has great spiritual merit—we shall live here, Lakṣmaṇa!'

Mighty Lakṣmaṇa, destroyer of his enemies, quickly built a hut for his brother. The hut was spacious, with a thatched roof supported by pillars, rafters of bamboo and a level floor. Lakṣmaṇa went down to the Godāvarī to bathe and came back with lotuses and fruit. He offered the flowers to the gods and after completing the prescribed rituals, he brought Rāma to show him the finished hut.

Sītā and Rāma were thrilled with their pleasant little dwelling. Rāma hugged Lakṣmaṇa and said, 'I am delighted with your wonderful work. All I can give you in return is this loving embrace. You are compassionate, gracious and righteous and so I feel that my father is not dead, he lives on in you!'

Rāma settled down happily in that bounteous region. Served by Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā, he lived there for some time, like a god in heaven.

two

One day, Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa returned to their hut as usual after bathing in the Godāvarī. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa completed the morning worship and sat down under the thatched area in front of the hut. With Sītā by his side, Rāma looked as beautiful as the moon in the Caitra constellation. The brothers chatted about this and that, telling each other stories and tales. As Rāma sat there, absorbed in conversation, a *rākṣasī* happened to pass by. She was Śūrpanakhā, the sister of the *rākṣasa* Rāvaṇa. When she saw Rāma sitting there, glorious as a heavenly being, she fell in love with him.

Rāma was young and handsome and radiant. His chest was as broad as a lion's, his arms were mighty and strong and his eyes were shaped like the petals of a lotus. He was dark as a blue lotus, as handsome as the god of love, equal to Indra in strength. The *rākṣasī* gazed at this man in wonder and was overcome with desire. Rāma presented a contrast to her in every possible way. He was handsome, she was ugly. He was slim-waisted, she was pot-bellied. His eyes were large and set wide in his face, she was cross-eyed. His hair was smooth and dark, hers was coppery and dried out. His voice was sweet and gentle, hers was

raucous and harsh. He was young, handsome and honourable, she was old, cruel and deceitful. He walked the path of virtue, she was wicked. He was charming and refined, she was crude.

'Your hair is matted like an ascetic's but you carry a bow and arrow and you are in the company of a woman,' she said to him, brimming with lust. 'What are you doing in this region filled with *rākṣasas*?'

Rāma replied by telling her all about himself. 'There was a king named Daśaratha, as mighty as the gods themselves. I am his oldest son and I am known in the world as Rāma. This is my brother Lakṣmaṇa who is deeply devoted to me. This is my wife Sītā, the princess of Videha. I have come to live in the forest and reap the fruits of my actions because I am bound by the wishes of my father, the king, and my mother. Now I want to know about you. Tell me, who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you here?'

The *rākṣasī* was entranced. 'Listen, Rāma, and I will tell you all about myself,' she said. 'I am the *rākṣasī* Śūrpanakhā and I can change my form at will. I do as I please. I wander through this forest by myself and I strike terror into the hearts of all creatures. My brother is Rāvaṇa, the king of the *rākṣasas*, and I have another brother, the mighty Kumbhakarṇa, who sleeps all the time. My third brother is the honourable Vibhīṣaṇa and he is not like a *rākṣasa* at all. My other two brothers are Khara and Dūṣaṇa, famed for their prowess in battle. But none of them have any control over me.

'I am in love with your good looks, Rāma. I think you must be the best of men. Be my husband and stay with me

for a long time! What use is this Sītā? She is ugly and deformed and simply no match for you. But I am your equal, consider me for a wife! I will devour this ugly mortal woman whose belly hangs so low. I shall eat your brother as well! And then, my love, you and I can roam through Daṇḍaka forest and enjoy the mountains and grasslands!'

Rāma laughed when he heard this speech from Śūrpanakhā whose eyes were drunk with lust. He spoke sincerely and gently to that poor creature who was a prisoner of passion. 'I am a married man and Sītā is my dearly beloved wife! I know women like you do not want to share your man with another. But, there is my younger brother Lakṣmaṇa. He is strong and brave and handsome and he is single. He needs a wife, for he has not yet experienced the joys of marriage. He will suit you as a husband, for you, too, are so beautiful! Take my brother as your husband, lovely lady, and enjoy him exclusively, as the sun enjoys the peaks of Mount Meru.'

Utterly confused and still overwhelmed by passion, Śūrpanakhā let go of Rāma and turned to Lakṣmaṇa. 'You are as beautiful as I am and so you are a worthy match for me. Come with me and roam happily through the Daṇḍakas!'

Lakṣmaṇa also had a way with words. He smiled and replied in the same light vein. 'I am the servant of my noble brother. Why do you want to marry a slave like me, lady as lovely as a lotus, and become a slave yourself? You, with your glowing complexion, should become the second wife of my older brother who has everything. Then all your wishes will be fulfilled! He will grow attached to you and renounce this ugly mortal wife of his. She is

deformed and old and her belly hangs so low! Who would remain attached to a mortal woman when he could have you with your lovely skin and dazzling beauty?'

Pot-bellied Śūrpanakhā took Lakṣmaṇa seriously as she had no sense of humour. Even more bewildered, she addressed Rāma who was sitting under the thatch with Sītā. 'You think nothing of me because you are so devoted to this ugly, old mortal with a hanging belly! I shall eat her up right now, in front of you! Then you and I can be together happily, without any interference.'

Her eyes blazing like fire, Śūrpanakhā charged towards the gentle-eyed Sītā, like malignant planets circling the Rohiṇī constellation. But Rāma stopped her headlong rush. 'Lakṣmaṇa, you should never joke with cruel and base creatures! Look how frightened Sītā is!' he cried. Angrily, Lakṣmaṇa pulled out his dagger and cut off Śūrpanakhā's ears and nose.

Śūrpanakhā screamed in pain and bolted back into the forest from which she had come. Her cries were like thunder during the rains and with blood streaming from her face she looked even more terrifying than usual. She went straight to her brother Khara who lived in Janasthāna, surrounded by his *rākṣasa* forces. She threw herself in front of him, as a bolt of lightning would fall from the sky.

Khara grew angry when he saw his sister lying on the ground, mutilated and dripping blood. 'Who did this to you?' he asked. 'You are so strong, capable of going wherever you please, able to change your shape at will, like unto Death itself! Tell me who it was that mutilated you. Was it a god, a *gandharva*, a great-souled *ṛṣi*, a *bhūta* or some mighty human hero? I cannot think of anyone in

this world other than the thousand-eyed Indra who would dare incur my wrath. Whoever it was, I shall take his life this very day with my deadly arrows! Who is this, whose blood shall be drunk by the earth as it surges, frothing, from his breast which has been pierced by my arrow? Who is this, whose flesh shall be pecked at by birds when he lies dead after I have killed him in battle? Not the gods nor the *gandharvas*, not the *rākṣasas* nor the *piśācas* shall be able to save him once I have laid my hands on him! Calm yourself, gather your wits about you and tell me who did this to you in the forest.'

Drenched in blood and almost fainting from fear and confusion, Śūrpanakhā told Khara all about Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and her mutilation. 'There were these two handsome young men, brave and strong, with eyes shaped like lotus petals,' wept Śūrpanakhā in response to her brother's angry words. 'They were wearing the skin of the black antelope but they looked like kings or *gandharvas* since they bore all the marks of royalty. I could not tell if they were gods or mortals. There was also this beautiful woman with them, slim-waisted and adorned with jewels. They used her as an excuse and did this to me, as if I were a loose woman without anyone to protect me! I want to drink their blood, fresh and frothing, when they have been killed in battle. Help me do this and you will have fulfilled my dearest wish!'

Khara summoned fourteen mighty *rākṣasas* who were like Death incarnate when his sister had finished her tale. 'Two men wearing the skin of the black antelope, fully armed and accompanied by a woman, have entered the Daṇḍaka forests. Kill the men and the woman, for my

sister wishes to drink their blood! Then come back here. Go quickly, *rākṣasas*! Crush them with your might and grant my sister her wish!' The fourteen *rākṣasas* left immediately, like clouds driven by the storm winds.

Fierce Śūrpanakhā led the fourteen *rākṣasas* to Rāma's settlement and pointed the two brothers and Sītā out to them as they sat under the leafy thatch in front of the hut. Rāma noticed that Śūrpanakhā had come back along with the *rākṣasas*. 'Stay here with Sītā for a bit,' he said to his valiant brother, 'while I kill the *rākṣasas* who have come here with that woman!' Rāma was aware of his own strength and so Lakṣmaṇa agreed.

Rāma strung his mighty bow which was decorated with gold and addressed the *rākṣasas*. 'We are the sons of Daśaratha, the brothers Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, and we have come into the dense and impenetrable Daṇḍaka forest with my wife Sītā! We live here quietly in the forest, eating only roots and fruits and following the code of righteous ascetics. Why do you wish to harm us?

'I am ready to fight you with my bow and arrow. I have been instructed to do so by the sages living in the forest whom you harass! Stand where you are! Do not turn back! But if you value your lives, rangers of the night, then you had better run!'

The fourteen *rākṣasas* had all killed brahmins. Armed with their spears, their eyes red with anger, they replied, 'You have incurred the wrath of our master, the mighty Khara. And for this, it is you who shall lose your life in battle today! How can you face us in battle when you are alone and we are so many? You couldn't possibly stand up to us in any circumstances! Your bow and arrows shall

fall from your hands when we attack you and then you shall die!'

The fourteen *rākṣasas* fell upon Rāma eagerly with all their weapons. They hurled their spears at him but the invincible Rāma shattered the spears with fourteen arrows decorated with gold. Then he fitted another fourteen arrows into his bow. They had been sharpened against the hardest stone and had iron tips that glittered like the sun. He released them as Indra looses his thunderbolt and they blazed through the air like lightning in the sky. In a flash, they had pierced the *rākṣasas*' breasts. Drenched in blood, the *rākṣasas* sank to the ground, like snakes plunging into an anthill. Their hearts split open, their bodies bathed in blood, the ugly creatures hit the ground like trees felled by an axe.

Śūrpanakhā screamed with fright and nearly swooned when she saw them fall. Bellowing with rage, she ran back to Khara and threw herself before him. The blood from her own wounds had dried up, except for a little trickle, like sap oozing from a cut vine.

'It was only a little while ago that I asked those blood-thirsty *rākṣasas* to do what you asked,' said Khara to that ill-omened creature when he saw her lying on the ground in a fit of temper. 'What are you crying for now? They are loyal and devoted to me and will do whatever I ask. They cannot possibly be dead, for they are the ones that do the killing. Tell me, why are you writhing on the ground like a snake and wailing "Alas, my lord!" over and over again? Why are you weeping as if you had no one to protect you? I am here to take care of you! Don't be frightened! Get up! There is no need to panic while I am around!'

Somewhat reassured by her brother's words, the wretched Śūrpanakhā wiped her tears. 'It is true that you sent out fourteen heroic and fierce *rākṣasas* to kill Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in order to please me. But Rāma killed all those mighty *rākṣasas* armed with all their great weapons with arrows that pierced their vitals! I was terribly frightened when I saw Rāma's prowess and those mighty warriors dead on the ground. I have come to you for refuge again, great *rākṣasa*, for I am terrified and very disturbed. I feel threatened from all sides! I am plunged into an ocean of terror with waves of fright and sea monsters of despair. Help me!

'Those mighty eaters of human flesh that you sent with me now lie dead, slain by Rāma's arrows! If you have any compassion for me or those dead *rākṣasas*, if you have the strength and courage to face Rāma, then get rid of him. He is a thorn in the side of the *rākṣasas* now that he has come to live in the Daṇḍaka forest! If you do not kill Rāma, my enemy, this very day, then I shall kill myself right now, right here in front of you!

'I know you cannot challenge Rāma in battle, even if you stood at the head of a huge army!' she taunted. 'You are known for your valour but it must be a lie! You have no courage! You cannot even kill these two mortals, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa! How can you live here without courage and strength? Take your followers and leave Janasthāna immediately! You will soon be destroyed by Rāma's might. Daśaratha's son is very powerful and his brother, who mutilated me, is also very strong!'

'I am outraged by this insult to you,' said heroic Khara in front of all the *rākṣasas*. 'My anger cannot be contained,

it rises like the ocean at high tide! I have no respect for Rāma! He is a mere mortal and is doomed to die. He will forfeit his life today for the terrible thing he has done! Stop this weeping and fretting. I shall send Rāma and his brother to meet the god of death! You shall drink Rāma's warm blood on the battlefield today as it wells from his body which has been struck by my battle axe.'

Śūrpanakhā was delighted to hear this and foolishly she began to praise her brother again. Alternately insulted and praised by his sister, Khara called for the commander of his forces, Dūṣaṇa. 'There are fourteen thousand *rākṣasas* at my command,' he said to Dūṣaṇa. 'They are incredibly swift, but they never turn and flee in battle. Dark as rain clouds, frightening and cruel, these immensely strong and powerful *rākṣasas* delight in hurting others. Make sure these courageous fellows with the pride of tigers and huge mouths are prepared for battle. Bring me my battle chariot at once and also my bows and arrows, my beautifully decorated swords and my spears of all kinds! I want to be in the forefront of the descendants of Pulastya! I shall slay Rāma in battle!'

three

When Khara's army went forth, an enormous donkey-coloured cloud thundered and rained dirty water, the colour of blood, upon the troops. As Khara's chariot proceeded along the main road which was strewn with flowers, his swift horses stumbled without reason. Even the sun was dark, circled by a blood red aureole that was like the arc described by a firebrand. A huge, vicious vulture flew over the battle banner which fluttered on its golden staff and hovered there for a little while.

As the army approached Janasthāna, birds and beasts of prey cried out in their harsh voices. Jackals howled hideously at the sun, their open mouths blazing, presaging ill for the *rākṣasa* army. Khara stood in his chariot and let out his great battle cry, but his voice quavered and his right arm trembled and twitched. When he looked around him, his vision blurred and his head throbbed, but in his immense foolishness, he would not turn back. He laughed as he observed these ill omens that were enough to make the hair stand on end.

'These omens do not worry me even though they are really frightening,' he said to his army. 'Unlike these weak mortals, I rely on my own strength and courage! I can bring the stars down from the sky with my arrows! When I am angry, I can kill Death himself! Rāma is arrogant in

his prowess but I shall not return without killing him and his brother Lakṣmaṇa! I shall slay them with my sharp arrows for treating my sister so badly. She shall have her wish and drink their blood! I have never been defeated in battle. You have seen that for yourselves so you know that I am not lying. I can even kill Indra, the king of the gods, when he rides into battle on his rutting elephant Airāvata, flourishing his thunderbolt! What then of these ridiculous mortals!' The army cheered with delight when they heard these mighty boasts even though they were firmly within the noose of death.

Meanwhile, the gods, the *ṛṣis*, the *gandharvas*, *siddhas* and the *cāraṇas* gathered, eager to witness the great battle. As those meritorious and virtuous beings came together, they whispered among themselves, 'May all go well with the cows and the brahmins and those who wish for the welfare of the worlds. May Rāma defeat the *rākṣasas* who are descended from Pulastya as Viṣṇu defeated the *asuras*!'

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa saw the same inauspicious signs as the *rākṣasa* army approached their settlement. The portents of evil, which boded ill for all creatures, made their hair stand on end. 'Look at these signs, mighty Lakṣmaṇa, that spell disaster for all beings,' said Rāma. 'They rise today for the destruction of the *rākṣasas*! Donkey-coloured clouds scud across the sky, thundering and raining bloody water! But my arrows are smoking, so eager are they to do battle. And my gold-encrusted bows quiver with anticipation, Lakṣmaṇa! The cries of the birds and animals indicate to me that something truly terrifying is close by, something that puts all lives in danger. My left arm twitches all the time. I have no doubt that there is

going to be a great battle, but these signs indicate that we are going to defeat our enemies.

'Take your bow and arrows and go into that cave with Sītā. It is hidden by trees and hard to access. Take refuge there. Please don't argue with me, just promise me that you will go!' When Lakṣmaṇa started towards the cave, Rāma sighed with relief that his brother had obeyed his instructions.

Rāma put on his armour that blazed like the fire and appeared like a smokeless flame shining in the dark. The great warrior lifted his bow, chose his arrows and filled the sky with the sound of his twanging bow string. Soon, the *rākṣasa* army could be seen. It approached from all directions, flying its battle banners and raising a tremendous din as it struck terror into the hearts of all beings. The *rākṣasas* roared and yelled, each one louder than the other. They twanged their bow strings and stamped their feet and beat their huge drums and the forest reverberated with the noise they made. Animals and birds ran from their shelters in panic without looking back as they made for a quieter place. The huge army with all its weapons moved inexorably towards Rāma like the surging ocean.

Rāma watched the eager army approaching. He drew his bow and readied his arrows, determined, in his anger, to kill all the *rākṣasas*. He blazed like the doomsday fire and his face was terrible to behold. He resembled Śiva, the wielder of the Pinaka bow, at the time when he destroyed Dakṣa's sacrifice.

Khara drew near the settlement and saw Rāma, the destroyer of his enemies, standing there with his bow.

Khara armed himself and told his charioteer to go forward. The charioteer urged the horses on towards Rāma and when Khara's ministers saw that he was ready to do battle, they gathered around, roaring out their battle cries.

With shouts of anger, the *rākṣasas* assailed Rāma with all kinds of weapons. The troops rained arrows on Rāma like clouds rain water upon a mountain, but Rāma countered their weapons with his own arrows like the sea engulfs a river. Though he was attacked from all sides, Rāma was no more perturbed than a mighty mountain that is assailed by thunder and lightning. Pierced by arrows and bleeding from all over his body, Rāma was as red as the setting sun.

Rāma pulled his bow back as far as it would go, turning it into a circle. He loosed hundreds of thousands of crescent-headed arrows which created havoc among the *rākṣasas*, placing them firmly within death's noose. Some of the especially powerful and brave *rākṣasas* confronted Rāma and attacked him with their swords, maces and spears. Rāma warded off their weapons with his arrows and cut off their heads.

The *rākṣasas* that survived ran to Khara in terror, seeking protection from Rāma's arrows. Dūṣaṇa reassured and rallied them, sending them back to face Rāma. They attacked with renewed vigour, picking up trees and rocks and stones, raising a din that was absolutely terrifying.

Rāma grew angrier and blazing like fire, he turned his arrows upon Dūṣaṇa. The army commander grabbed his mace that was as big as a mountain peak and terrifying enough to make the hair stand on end. Brandishing that huge club, he rushed headlong towards Rāma. Rāma

loosed two arrows that severed the charging Dūṣaṇa's bracelet-covered arms. Dūṣaṇa's enormous body hit the ground and his mighty club, which was like Indra's flagstaff, fell from his hand.

Rāma continued his attack on Dūṣaṇa's followers and the *rākṣasas* fell to the earth bleeding, their armour, weapons and ornaments scattered, their heads and bodies split wide open. Bloodied, and with their hair streaming back from their faces, they covered the battlefield the way a sacrificial altar is strewn with *kuśa* grass. In no time at all the entire forest, now littered with dead *rākṣasas*, was transformed into a gory hell strewn with flesh and blood. Fourteen thousand *rākṣasas* who were capable of terrible things were slain by a lone man who fought on foot. The only survivors from that army were the great chariot-warrior Khara, the *rākṣasa* Triśiras* and Rāma himself.

Triśiras saw that Khara was preparing to attack Rāma himself. 'Let me go and fight him, O mighty warrior,' he said to his commander. 'You can watch the great Rāma fall in this fight! I swear to you, I will kill this man who deserves to die!' Eager to embrace death, Triśiras pleaded insistently and finally, Khara allowed him to advance upon Rāma.

Triśiras climbed into his horse-drawn chariot and surged towards Rāma, looking like a three-crested mountain. With a single arrow, Rāma toppled the battle banner that fluttered above his chariot. Dazed and bewildered, the *rākṣasa* dismounted, but Rāma pierced him through the heart as he stood there. Then, with three

* Triśiras obviously had three heads, as indicated by his name.

peerless arrows that were sharp and swift, Rāma severed Triśiras' heads. Drenched in blood, the *rākṣasa's* body followed his heads and fell to the ground.

Khara watched Dūṣaṇa and Triśiras being slain in battle and was somewhat disturbed by Rāma's strength and skills. The fact that the mighty *rākṣasa* army had been routed and its generals killed by Rāma single-handed frightened Khara but he attacked Rāma fiercely. He drew his powerful bow and loosed blood-seeking arrows at Rāma which flew through the air like venomous snakes. He displayed his archer's skills with great flourish and standing in his chariot, performed many impressive battle manouevres. Khara filled the sky with arrows but Rāma countered them with his own that were like flames, bringing down a rain of sparks as they flew.

Then Rāma picked up Viṣṇu's mighty bow that had been given to him by Agastya. He loosed golden-feathered arrows from it and brought down Khara's battle banner. The golden banner, so beautiful to behold, now lay on the ground in tatters like the sun fallen to the earth. Khara knew which were the vulnerable spots on a mortals' body and sent four arrows into the region of Rāma's heart. Blood dripping from his body, Rāma grew angrier still and he was truly an awesome sight.

With three well-chosen arrows, he pierced Khara's head and arms. With another thirteen, he brought down Khara's bow, his chariot, his horses and his charioteer. He used his thirteenth arrow to wound Khara in the heart. Khara grabbed his mace and leapt to the ground, ready to confront Rāma. He hurled his gold-decorated mace at Rāma and it came flying through the air like thunder

accompanied by lightning. It burned trees and bushes, but Rāma cut it to bits with his arrows even before it reached the ground.

Khara frowned and looked around for something to throw at Rāma. He saw an enormous *sāla* tree and wrenched it from the ground with his huge arms. He hurled it at Rāma, roaring, 'Now you shall die!' But Rāma slashed it to pieces with a veritable flood of arrows. He was now determined to kill Khara. His eyes blazed with anger and his body was bathed in sweat as he unleashed a shower of arrows which pierced the *rākṣasa's* body. Blood poured from Khara's wounds, frothing like the waterfalls on Mount Prasravaṇa.

Bewildered by arrows and maddened by the smell of blood, Khara charged at Rāma, but Rāma was an experienced warrior and took a quick step aside. Then he chose a fiery arrow which rivalled Brahmā's weapon and fitted it into the bow that had been given to him by Indra. He pulled the bow back as far as it would go and released the arrow which thundered through the air and felled the *rākṣasa*. The fiery arrow consumed Khara in the same way that death is consumed by Śiva's fires at the end of time.

The gods and other wondrous beings who had come to witness the battle rejoiced and praised Rāma with joy in their hearts. Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā came out of the cave where they had been hiding and entered the settlement. Victorious Rāma, lauded by all the sages, returned to his hut where he was greeted with delight and respect by the heroic Lakṣmaṇa. Sītā embraced her husband, overjoyed that he was unharmed as well as victorious.

four

Śūrpanakhā had watched while Rāma performed the impossible task of slaying fourteen thousand *rākṣasas* as well as Dūṣaṇa, Triśiras and Khara single-handed. Roaring like a thunder cloud, she went to Lankā, the city ruled by Rāvaṇa.

She saw Rāvaṇa in his wondrous chariot Puṣpaka, blazing with splendour and surrounded by his ministers like Indra is surrounded by the *māruts*. Sitting on a golden throne as bright as the sun, Rāvaṇa was as magnificent as the fire on a sacrificial altar. Undefeated and heroic in battle, he was like death itself, no matter who faced him, gods, *gandharvas*, *bhūtas* or the great *ṛṣis*. Rāvaṇa had been wounded many times in the battles between the gods and the *asuras* and he still carried the scars from when Airāvata had gored him on the chest with his tusks. Broad-chested, with ten heads and twenty arms, Rāvaṇa bore all the marks of royalty and looked like a king. He was as large as a mountain, had smooth dark skin and sparkling white teeth as bright as his gold earrings.

Rāvaṇa could stir up placid oceans, he could play with mountains and he could defeat the gods in battle. He did whatever he liked whenever he liked. He constantly violated *dharma*. He lusted after the wives of others, he

was capable of using every celestial weapon and he was always disrupting sacrifices. He had gone to the city of Bhogavatī, defeated Vāsuki and then abducted Takṣaka's lovely wife after he had defeated him as well. In Kailāsa, he conquered Kubera and took the flying chariot Puṣpaka from him, a chariot that could go anywhere at any time. He was so strong that in his anger he could destroy the forests of Caitraratha, Nandana and other celestial gardens and pleasure groves.

With his enormous size and prodigious strength, Rāvaṇa could stop the sun and moon from rising. Long ago, he had performed austerities for ten thousand years in the forest and had offered his heads as a sacrifice to Brahmā. For this, he had been granted invulnerability in battle with the gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *ṛṣis* and *uragas*, every kind of being, in fact, except mortals. Mighty Rāvaṇa had even defiled the *soma* juice as it was being pressed inside the sacred enclosure by brahmins. This cruel and wicked brahmin-killer would ruin sacrifices just as they were about to be completed. Ruthless and harsh, Rāvaṇa wished ill for all beings and the entire universe was terrified of him.

Śūrpanakhā gazed at her mighty brother, dressed in celestial clothes and ornaments, who was descended from Pulastya and who was the king of the *rākṣasas*. That poor mutilated creature, terrified and confused, showed Rāvaṇa her wounds. Pathetic and angry, Śūrpanakhā spoke harshly to Rāvaṇa, who made the worlds weep, in front of all his ministers. 'Intoxicated with lust, indulging all your desires, living entirely by your whims and totally without any restraint, you have no idea of the danger you are in! You should know this but you don't!

'Subjects have no more regard for a wayward and wilful ruler who seeks vulgar pleasures than they have for the flames of a funeral pyre. A king who gives no attention to the affairs of state will be destroyed along with his kingdom because of this neglect. Now that you have angered the gods, *gandharvas* and the *dānavas*, how can you go on without the services of spies and informers? The king who has no control over his spies, his finances and his administration is no better than a commoner, great hero!

'You don't even know that your people have been massacred in Janasthāna. I can only conclude from this that you have no informants and that you are surrounded by incompetent ministers. Fourteen thousand fierce *rākṣasas* as well as Khara and Dūṣaṇa were killed by Rāma alone! Janasthāna has been destroyed and the Daṇḍaka forests have been cleansed. The sages no longer live in fear because of Rāma, who always does the right thing. Rāvaṇa, you are greedy, lustful and utterly dependent upon others! How could you not know about this catastrophe which occurred within your own kingdom?'

Rāvaṇa, the king of the *rākṣasas*, with all his power and wealth and pride, thought long and hard about Śūrpanakhā's insulting remarks.

'Who is this Rāma? What does he look like?' asked Rāvaṇa when his sister had finished her invective. 'How brave is he? Is he strong and skilled? Why has he come to the inhospitable Daṇḍaka forest? What weapons did he use in battle to kill Khara, Triśiras and Dūṣaṇa?'

Śūrpanakhā began to describe Rāma as he really was, her anger rising. 'Rāma is the son of Daśaratha. He has strong and powerful arms and his eyes are large and

beautiful. He wears the skin of the black antelope and he is as handsome as the god of love. He uses a bow decorated with gold that is so beautiful it equals Indra's. He showers blazing arrows that fall like poisonous snakes. I never saw mighty Rāma drawing his bow or releasing a single arrow when he was fighting. All I saw was the huge army felled by a rain of arrows, as the ripened crop is laid low by Indra's storms.

'Fourteen thousand *rākṣasas*, each capable of terrible things, as well as Khara and Dūṣaṇa, were killed by the sharp arrows of a man who fought alone and on foot! In one and a half hours, the sages were relieved of their fear and the Daṇḍaka region was made safe. I was the only one who escaped, disgraced by Rāma who obviously hesitated to kill a woman.

'Rāma has a brother, brave, strong and his equal in virtue, quick to anger and invincible against all beings. His name is Lakṣmaṇa and he is devoted to Rāma. He is Rāma's right arm, the breath outside his body. Rāma also has a beautiful wife named Sītā. Large-eyed and delicate, she is the princess of Videha and she is the best of all women. Not even among the gods, the *gandharvīs*, the *yakṣīs* or the *kinnaris* have I seen a woman as lovely as this one. Whoever has her as a wife and shares her embraces will be the happiest person in the world. She would be an ideal match for you. I tried to carry that peerless creature, with the ample hips and high full breasts, away as a wife for you. When you see her face, which is as beautiful as the full moon, you shall be a victim of love's arrows. If you want her as your wife then put your best foot forward without any further delay!

'Take revenge for your people, king of the *rākṣasas*, and kill cruel Rāma who lives like a hermit. Once you have killed Rāma and the great warrior Lakṣmaṇa, Sītā will be vulnerable and helpless and you can have your way with her. If you like my plan then set forth immediately with no second thoughts!'

Rāvaṇa dismissed his ministers and began to think about what he should do. He considered the matter from all angles and after weighing its virtues and shortcomings, he decided to go ahead with Śūrpanakhā's idea.

He ordered his charioteer to prepare his chariot which was decorated with gold and studded with jewels. It was drawn by asses with the faces of *piśācas* and could go absolutely anywhere.

The king of the *rākṣasas*, the younger brother of Kubera, rumbled like thunder in his chariot and went towards the ocean. On the far shore, he saw a solitary hut deep inside a forest in a quiet, sacred spot. And there, Rāvaṇa came upon the *rākṣasa* Mārīca. Mārīca wore the skin of a black antelope, his hair was matted into locks and he hardly ate anything at all.

Mārīca greeted Rāvaṇa with all the rituals appropriate for a guest. 'Listen to me, Mārīca,' said Rāvaṇa. 'I am in trouble and you are the only one who can help me. You know that my brothers Khara and Dūṣaṇa, my sister Śūrpanakhā, Triśiras who feeds on human flesh, and several other mighty *rākṣasas* live in Janasthāna. They live there under my instructions and they torment the sages who practise *dharma* in the forest. There were fourteen thousand *rākṣasas* capable of terrible things, brave and eager to do battle, under Khara's command. They got into

a fight with Rāma.

'Even though Rāma was in a rage, he was totally silent on the battlefield. But he used his bow so effectively that all the fourteen thousand *rākṣasas* were killed. Killed by the arrows of a man fighting alone and on foot! Triśiras, Dūṣaṇa and Khara were also killed and the Daṇḍaka forests are now free of danger.

'This Rāma shall have a short life! His angry father exiled him and his wife to the forest. Now that he has slain the entire *rākṣasa* army, he is a disgrace to the kṣatriyas. His conduct is improper, he is dull-witted and controlled entirely by his senses. He violates *dharma* and wishes ill for all living creatures. Taking refuge in his superior strength, he mutilated my sister in the forest by cutting off her nose and ears. He did all this without reason, without enmity.

'I am going to abduct his wife Sītā from Janasthāna. She is as beautiful as a daughter of the gods. And I want you to help me with this. With my brothers and someone as mighty as you by my side, I would not worry even if I had to meet the gods in battle! You are unrivalled for your courage and pride on the battlefield. Give me all the help you can, *rākṣasa*!

'I came to you for this reason alone. Listen and I will tell you what I need you to do. Turn yourself into a wondrous golden deer with silver spots and graze in front of Rāma's settlement, within sight of Rāma and Sītā. I have no doubt that when Sītā sees you as the deer, she will ask Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to get it for her. That place is absolutely deserted so I can carry Sītā away in their absence, just as the eclipse grasps the moon, without

anything to hinder me. After that, when I have fulfilled my dearest wish and Rāma is grief-stricken because of his wife's abduction, I shall attack him without any problems.'

Mārīca turned pale as he listened. His mouth was dry with fear and he licked his lips, agitated because he had had an earlier encounter with Rāma. He decided to give Rāvaṇa some advice that would stand them both in good stead.

'It is easy to find someone who will speak to you pleasantly, king!' said the wise and eloquent Mārīca. 'It is much harder to find people who will tell you unpleasant truths, or people who will listen to them. You obviously have not made use of competent spies or you would know that Rāma is a man of great courage and virtue, like unto Indra and Varuṇa. I wish all was well with the *rākṣasas* and that Rāma did not want to wipe them off the face of the earth in his anger.

'A foolish king, like you, who is a slave to his passions, acts improperly and is advised by wicked ministers can only lead himself, his kingdom and his people to total ruin. Rāma has not renounced his father nor has he transgressed the bounds of decency. He is neither greedy nor badly behaved and he is certainly not a disgrace to the kṣatriyas. He is virtuous and desires the best for all beings.

'When he realized that his honourable father was besotted with Kaikeyī, he agreed to go to the forest on the basis of *dharma*. He renounced the kingdom and all its royal pleasures to make Daśaratha and Kaikeyī happy. He is not cruel or dull-witted or unrestrained. It is not appropriate for you to utter such slanderous lies! Rāma never transgresses *dharma*. He is good and true and is as

justifiably the king of the world as Indra is the king of the gods.

'How could you even think of abducting Sītā? She is protected by her own power. It would be like trying to rob the sun of its glory. Why do you want to do this absurd and unnecessary thing? The moment Rāma sees you on the battlefield will be your last! If you value your life, your kingdom and your happiness, all of which are not easy to obtain, then take the advice of your righteous ministers led by Vibhīṣaṇa.

'I think it is folly for you to face Rāma in combat. But more than this, king of the *rākṣasas*, let me tell you something that will indicate to you what is possible and what is not!

'Long ago, when Rāma was just a boy, the sage Viśvāmitra brought him to his hermitage to prevent me from interrupting and destroying his sacrifice. I entered the hermitage with my weapon held high, not giving Rāma a second look. He saw me and calmly strung his bow. I was stupid to have ignored him simply because he was a boy. I charged towards Viśvāmitra's sacrificial altar. Rāma loosed a single arrow that was sure and true and when it struck me, I was lifted and thrown into the ocean, hundreds of *yojanās* away.

'If you make an enemy of Rāma despite my warnings, you will be bringing a terrible calamity upon yourself. You will cause the destruction of the *rākṣasas* who love to play and celebrate and enjoy all kinds of pleasures. You will see your fabulous city of Lankā, adorned with gems and glorious buildings, laid low because of Sītā. You will see Lankā consumed, its mansions pierced by arrows going

up in flames.

'You have thousands of beautiful women as your wives and concubines. Amuse yourself with them and protect your race! Don't do anything that would displease Rāma if you want to preserve your power, prestige, your kingdom and your life. I am your friend and I wish you well. If you ignore my advice and persist with your plan to abduct Sītā, Rāma's arrows will take your life. Your army will be destroyed and your people shall die!

'Rāma's arrows spared me and when I escaped with my life, I came to live here, to meditate and practise austerities. I see Rāma in every tree! Clad in his antelope skin, he carries his immense bow like the god of death carries his noose! In my terror, Rāvaṇa, I see thousands of Rāmas, the entire forest seems to have turned into Rāma! I see Rāma where he isn't. He enters my dreams and I scream in terror! Even words that start with "R" frighten me! I tremble when people use words like "*radha*" or "*ratha*"!

'I know Rāma's strength, Rāvaṇa! You cannot stand up to him in battle! Fight with him openly if you insist or keep the peace. But never mention Rāma again if you wish to see me!'

Even though Mārīca's advice was simple, Rāvaṇa would not listen to him. He dismissed his words the way a man who wishes to die refuses all medication.

'My dear Mārīca, your words are as useless as seeds sown in the sand,' retorted Rāvaṇa rudely, impelled by his fate. 'Your words will not stop me from facing Rāma in combat. He is stupid and wicked and, above all, he is a mere mortal! He gave up his kingdom, his friends and his

family and fled into the forest to honour the words of a low and vulgar woman.

'I swear before you that I will abduct Sītā, the wife of the man who killed Khara in battle! I have made up my mind and even the gods, led by Indra, cannot persuade me otherwise!

'Had I asked you about the merits of my plans, you might have had the right to speak like this. But I never asked you that. All I asked is that you help me carry them out! Turn yourself into a wondrous golden deer with silver spots and Sītā will definitely want to possess you. She will be enthralled by the deer and will ask Rāma to capture it for her. And when Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are out of the way, I shall carry her off swiftly, the way Indra carried off Saci.

'You can do exactly as you please after you have done what I ask. I shall give you half my kingdom, resolute *rākṣasa*! I shall take you to Lankā with me once my task has been accomplished. You must do this for me, even if I have to force you! The man who opposes his king never comes to a good end. You may have survived Rāma but you will not survive me if you oppose my wishes! Consider this and then do what you think best!'

'Ah Rāvaṇa! Who is the wicked person who has advised you to do this foolish thing? It will lead to the destruction of you, your sons, your kingdom and all your people!' cried Mārīca. 'Who does not wish to see you happy? Who wants you at death's door? Rāma will kill you shortly after he has killed me! I am going to die in either case. But if you abduct Sītā, you can be sure that you, too, shall soon be dead!'

five

Despite his better judgment, Mārīca decided to go with Rāvaṇa because he feared the king of the *rākṣasas*. Feeling terrible, he sighed, 'Let us go, then! The weapon that Rāma raises when he sees me will be the instrument of my death! Now that you are so determined to go through with your plans, there is nothing more I can do. Let us go, my child, and may good luck go with you!'

Rāvaṇa was delighted with Mārīca's decision. 'These brave words could just as easily have been spoken by me!' he said as he embraced Mārīca warmly. 'Now you sound like Mārīca! You must have been someone else when you were speaking earlier! Come with me! Climb into my flying chariot which is made of gold and is drawn by *piśāca*-faced donkeys!'

Rāvaṇa and Mārīca flew over towns and forests, mountains and rivers, kingdoms and cities. When they reached the Daṇḍaka forest, Rāvaṇa spotted Rāma's settlement and they dismounted. Taking Mārīca by the hand, Rāvaṇa said, 'Look, you can see Rāma's hut circled by banana trees. Go quickly, my friend, and put our plan into action!'

Mārīca transformed himself into a magnificent deer in an instant and began to graze at the entrance to Rāma's settlement. His horns were tipped with emerald and his face had black and white streaks. One side of his face was as beautiful as the red lotus, the other was like the blue lily. One of his ears was blue, the other a rich green. His neck was gracefully arched and his belly gleamed softly like the moon. His body was the colour of the *mahua* flower and his hooves were lapis lazuli. Slim and strong, the deer's tail shone with the colours of the rainbow and his entire body seemed to be studded with jewels. The *rākṣasa* lit up the woods at the entrance to the settlement with the splendour of the magical form that he had taken on.

The many-coloured deer wandered around so that Sītā would see him. His shining spots caught the eye as he grazed on the new shoots and grasses. He went over to the banana trees and browsed among the house flowers, lingering in the places where Sītā would see him. The magnificent deer, shining with his lotus hues, wandered lazily in the vicinity of the hut. Sometimes, he would walk away and then come back, or rush off as if he were in a great hurry and return yet again. He joined a herd of deer at the entrance to the settlement and after frolicking there awhile, he returned and lay on the ground, trying to attract Sītā's attention.

The deer leapt into the air, twirled and landed back on the ground. All the other forest animals came to see him, but when they got close, they fled in all directions. The *rākṣasa*, who normally enjoyed killing these animals, did not attack them in order to preserve his disguise. He contented himself with merely touching them.

At that very moment, the large-eyed Sītā appeared and strolled among the flowering trees and bushes. That beautiful woman who did not deserve to live in the forest, suddenly noticed the magnificent, jewelled deer. Her eyes wide with wonder, she gazed at the exquisite creature with the shimmering body and sparkling pearly teeth. When the deer saw Rāma's beloved, he strutted up and down, lighting up the forest with his brilliance. Sītā was totally wonderstruck by the deer, the likes of which she had never seen before.

Beautiful Sītā, her own skin glowing like gold, watched the glittering deer as she gathered her flowers. He seemed to be golden on one side and silver on the other. She called out delightedly to her husband and to mighty Lakṣmaṇa. They looked over in her direction and they, too, saw the deer.

Lakṣmaṇa was immediately suspicious. 'I am sure that deer is the *rākṣasa* Mārīca!' he said to Rāma. 'Vile Mārīca can take any form he chooses. He has killed many kings while they were hunting in the forest. A jewelled deer like this simply cannot exist anywhere in the world. This has to be some trick!'

But the sweetly smiling Sītā would not allow Lakṣmaṇa to speak any further. She had been completely deceived. 'Noble one, this deer has captivated my mind,' she said to Rāma happily. 'Bring him to me, great hero! He can be our pet! All kinds of animals come to our hut but I have never seen a deer like this! He lights up the whole area with his splendour!

'If you can capture this deer alive, he will be the source of great wonder and amazement. When our exile is over

and we return again to Ayodhyā, this wondrous deer can adorn our private apartments. He will delight Bharata and my mothers-in-law as well as you and me! I will be happy even with his skin if you can't get him alive. I would love to sit with you on the golden skin of this deer when he is dead.

'I know it is inappropriate for a woman to speak cruelly like this out of greed, but the deer's magnificent body has me completely enthralled!'

Rāma, too, was captivated by the golden creature with the jewelled horns that seemed to shine like the sun or like a galaxy of stars. He listened to Sītā's words and watched the deer with delight. 'Look Lakṣmaṇa,' he said, 'this deer has captured Sītā's imagination. It is so beautiful that it may not actually be a deer. Nowhere in this forest or on earth, nor even in Nandana or Caitraratha, can there be a deer to match this one! Look at his exquisite fur with those shining spots! His tongue is like the flame from a fire. He yawns like lightning from a cloud! Who could resist an animal like this with its emerald face and pearly belly?

'Beautiful Sītā shall sit with me on the jewelled skin of this incredible deer! I cannot imagine that the fur of any other animal could be as soft as this one's!

'And if, as you suggest, Lakṣmaṇa, this deer is the creation of sorcery and magic, that it is really a *rākṣasa*, then it is my duty to kill it! Wicked, ruthless Mārīca has killed many sages in the past in this very forest. He has killed kings, too, by appearing suddenly during the hunt. For that, too, the deer deserves to die!

'I am always self-controlled and I cleave to *dharma*. This *rākṣasa* will die because he has challenged me. Look

after Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, and be prepared for any emergency! Protecting Sītā is our most important duty. I shall return after I have either captured this deer or killed it. Sītā longs for this deerskin, but look after her while I am gone! This deer shall die today because of its skin! Stay here in the settlement and be on your guard!

'I shall kill the deer with a single arrow and return as soon as I can. Be careful until then!'

Mighty Rāma girt his gold-hilted sword, picked up his bow, strapped on his quivers and left quickly. The deer hid in fright when he saw Rāma coming and then showed himself again. Rāma ran to where he thought he had seen the deer. Visible one moment and invisible the next, the deer ran deep into the forest, seeming to look back every now and then at the man armed with the bow.

The deer leapt into the air in apparent confusion, appeared for a little while, and then disappeared into the trees as the autumn moon disappears behind the clouds. For one instant, he seemed to be close but the very next moment, he seemed far away. Darting in and out of view, the deer made Rāma angry. But he stayed focused and did not give up the chase.

Rāma grew tired and sat under a tree to rest. He saw the deer close by, surrounded by a group of forest animals. Rāma decided to kill him at that very moment and he fitted an arrow into his bow. He loosed the flaming arrow which hissed through the air like a serpent, as would Brahmā's special weapon. The arrow tore through the deer's body and pierced Mārīca's heart. Mārīca let out an awful scream and leapt into the air. He fell to the ground with barely a breath in his body. At the moment of his

death, Mārīca gave up his artificial form.

Mārīca knew that the moment had arrived and in a voice exactly like Rāma's, he cried out, 'Oh Sītā! Oh Lakṣmaṇa!' He renounced the deer's body and appeared as he really was. His body was as large as a mountain and he had enormous teeth. Wearing all his ornaments and jewels, Mārīca breathed his last.

Rāma looked at the fierce *rākṣasa* lying on the ground and remembered what Lakṣmaṇa had said. His thoughts went immediately to Sītā. 'The *rākṣasa* cried "Oh Sītā! Oh Lakṣmaṇa!" as he was dying. What will Sītā think when she hears that? And what kind of state will mighty Lakṣmaṇa be in?' thought Rāma and shuddered. He felt sure that something terrible was about to happen and fear clutched at his heart. He killed another deer and hurried back to Janasthāna with its meat.

Sītā heard the piteous cry which sounded just like her husband. 'That sounded like someone in trouble! My mind and heart are uneasy! Go quickly into the forest! Your brother is in trouble! He has fallen into the hands of the *rākṣasas* like a bull among lions!'

'I will not go,' said Lakṣmaṇa who was bound by his brother's instructions.

'You pretend to be your brother's friend, Lakṣmaṇa,' cried Sītā angrily, 'but you are really his enemy! You do not go to help him when he is in trouble! You wish him dead because of me! You rejoice in his misfortune! You have no love for your brother. That is why you stand around here without a care in the world, even though Rāma is nowhere to be seen! What are you doing here, when the one for whose sake you came here is in danger?' Sītā burst

into tears like a frightened doe.

Lakṣmaṇa tried to reassure her. 'Dear lady, there is not a single creature who can defeat Rāma in combat. Everyone knows that, for he is Indra's equal. You should not speak to me like this. I cannot leave you alone in the forest without Rāma! Even if the kings of the three worlds and all the gods and all their armies were to attack Rāma, they could not defeat him.

'Don't panic. Be calm. Your husband will be back very soon after he has killed the deer. It was not his voice we heard. It was something else. That *rākṣasa* can do anything with his magical powers. Rāma left you in my care, so I cannot leave you here and go away. The *rākṣasas* are hostile to us after the death of Khara and the massacre at Janasthāna. Those violent creatures can make all kinds of sounds in this forest. Do not be worried!'

Sītā grew angrier and her eyes blazed. 'Ignoble creature! Heartless wretch!' she said harshly to honourable Lakṣmaṇa. 'Disgrace to your family! I can only think that you talk to me like this because you are delighted that Rāma is in trouble. But I am not surprised at this kind of behaviour from a wicked kinsman! You hide your real feelings and act like a hypocrite!

'You followed Rāma, who is vulnerable and without protection, into the forest only so that you could have me! But this plan, whether yours or Bharata's, will never work! I have been loved by the golden-skinned, lotus-eyed Rāma! How can I ever settle for an ordinary man? I shall kill myself in front of you right now! I cannot bear to live on earth for a single moment without Rāma!'

Lakṣmaṇa's hair stood on end when he heard Sītā's

cruel words. But he controlled himself, joined his palms respectfully and said, 'I cannot argue with you because you are like a goddess to me. But I am not surprised to hear such words from a woman, Sītā! Women are like this everywhere in the world. They are unrighteous and fickle and they breed mischief. May the gods of the forest bear witness to the fact that everything I said was just and true and that your words were harsh and unfair. Shame on you for doubting me, when I am bound by my elder brother's instructions! But then, you have acted from the essentially corrupt nature that all women have. I am going to find Rāma. May all be well with you and may the deities of the forest protect you, large-eyed lady!'

'Lakṣmaṇa, without Rāma I shall plunge into the Godāvarī or get rid of this body by hurling it upon sharp rocks! Or drink poison! Or walk into fire! But I will not touch any man other than Rāma, not even with my foot!' wept Sītā. Upset by her tears, Lakṣmaṇa tried to console her, but Sītā would not say a word to her husband's brother. Lakṣmaṇa joined his palms, made a slight bow and left to search for Rāma, turning back anxiously every now and then to look at Sītā.

six

Lakṣmaṇa was angry at having been spoken to like that, but he was also concerned about Rāma and so he left the settlement hurriedly.

Rāvaṇa pounced upon the moment that he had been waiting for. He appeared in front of Sītā in the form of a renunciant. He was wearing clean saffron robes, his hair was in a knot on top of his head, and he wore sandals on his feet. He carried an umbrella and a water pot and the traditional staff on his left shoulder.

Mighty Rāvaṇa approached that woman who was alone in the forest without Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, like the oncoming darkness at twilight when neither the sun nor the moon shines. Cruel Rāvaṇa came closer to the beautiful princess, like a malignant planet moves towards the constellation Rohiṇī in the absence of the moon.

Even the trees in Janasthāna dared not move when they saw that awful creature, and the wind died down. The fast-flowing Godāvarī slowed in fear when she saw Rāvaṇa watching Sītā with his blood-red eyes. Nearer and nearer came the *rākṣasa* to that lovely woman whose lips were red, whose face was like the full moon, whose eyes were like lotus petals, as she sat there in her yellow silks,

weeping, under the thatch in front of her hut.

The king of the *rākṣasas* was struck by the arrows of love. Muttering the Vedas, he spoke to Sītā in that lonely and deserted place. She seemed to him the most exquisite woman in the three worlds, like Śrī herself, without the lotus.

'Who are you, lovely creature, with your golden skin, your yellow silk garments and your garland of lotuses as beautiful as the lotus pond itself? Your teeth are small and pearly white, your large eyes are tinged a delicate pink in the corners and your pupils are a deep black. Your hips are wide and your thighs are as strong as an elephant's trunk. Your breasts are round and full, tilted upwards and their nipples quiver. They are firm and rest close together like the fruit of the palm tree. They are adorned with jewels and catch the eye.

'You have overwhelmed me with your charming smile, your lovely teeth and your beautiful eyes, as the river in spate floods its banks. Your tiny waist can be circled with a single hand! Your breasts rise high and your hair is gorgeous. You are not a *gandharvī* or a *kinnari* or a *yakṣī*, for I have never seen anyone as beautiful as you on this earth.

'May good fortune protect you! You should not be living here. This is the region in which fierce and cruel *rākṣasas* abound! You should be living within a city, in a stately home with a perfumed garden! Dark-eyed lady, you should have the best of flowers and foods and clothes, even the very best of husbands! This place is the home of *rākṣasas*. What are you doing living here? There are monkeys and lions and elephants and tigers and bears and

leopards and all kinds of other animals here. Aren't you afraid of them? How can you be here alone and not be frightened?

'Who are you? Who do you belong to? Where did you come from? What are you doing alone in these terrible Daṇḍaka forests which are filled with *rākṣasas*?'

Thus did the black-hearted Rāvaṇa praise Sītā and she honoured him with all the respect due to a guest, for he had come to her in the form of a brahmin. 'Seat yourself comfortably,' she said, handing him a grass mat. 'Here is water to wash your feet and forest produce for you to eat. I hope you enjoy it!' Rāvaṇa gazed at the princess who treated him so respectfully, and the moment he decided that he had to carry her off, he sealed his fate.

Meanwhile, Sītā waited anxiously for her husband who had gone off after the deer and for his brother. But though she scanned the forest, all she could see was the green of the trees and no sign of Rāma or Lakṣmaṇa.

Sītā told Rāvaṇa all about herself in response to his questions and related the circumstances that had brought her to the forest with her husband. 'But who are you?' she asked. 'What is your name and what is your clan? Tell me, brahmin, why do you wander alone in the Daṇḍaka forest?'

'I am Rāvaṇa, the king of the *rākṣasas*!' he said quickly to Rāma's beautiful wife. 'I am the one that all the worlds, the gods, the *asuras* and the *pannagas* dread! I am Rāvaṇa, Sītā, the king of the *rākṣasa* hordes! When I set eyes on you with your golden skin and your yellow garments, I lost all interest in my own women, even though they are the finest in all the worlds. Become my chief queen!

'My capital city, Lankā, is on a mountain top in the middle of the ocean. Give up this awful life! We can wander in the lovely groves there! If you become my wife, five thousand women adorned with every kind of jewel will be your slaves!'

Sītā was outraged. 'I am devoted to Rāma who is as steadfast as Mount Mahendra and as deep as the ocean,' she retorted scornfully. 'He has mighty arms and a broad chest and the gait and valour of a lion. I follow that lion among men like a shadow. How can a jackal like you covet a lioness like me? I am as far from you as the shining, golden sun! Trying to abduct me would be like carrying off Mount Mahendra with your bare hands, or drinking the deadly *kālakūṭa* poison and hoping to stay alive and well! If you think you can carry off Rāma's beloved wife, you might as well pluck out your eyes with a needle, or lick the edge of a knife with your tongue!

'The difference between you and Rāma is like that between a lion and a jackal, between a tiny stream and the mighty ocean, between the drink of the gods and coarse rice gruel, like that between gold and iron, sandal paste and mud, a house cat and a magnificent tusker!' But even though the chaste woman spoke so fearlessly to the wicked *rākṣasa*, she was trembling like a slender banana plant in a high wind.

'I am the brother of Kubera, the god of wealth!' said Rāvaṇa, frowning. 'Lovely lady, I am Rāvaṇa, the mighty ten-headed *rākṣasa*. The gods and *gandharvas*, the *piśācas*, the birds and the serpents run in fear of me! All creatures see me as death!

'For a number of reasons, I developed an enmity with

my brother Kubera and I challenged him to combat. I defeated him with my superior strength. Terrified, he surrendered his realm and now lives on Mount Kailāsa. I took his flying chariot, the magical Puṣpaka, from him. It can go anywhere. Even the gods led by Indra flee when they see my wrathful face. The wind does not blow where I go and the sun becomes as cool as the moon for fear of me. Leaves do not dance on their trees and rivers stop flowing in the places I visit.

'Lankā, my exquisite city, lies on the far side of the ocean. It is filled with *rākṣasas* but it rivals Indra's Amarāvatī. Surrounded by sparkling white walls, it has gates of lapis, inside which are mansions decorated with gold. It is filled with the noise of elephants and horses and the sweet music of pipes. It abounds in beautiful gardens which have trees that bear flowers and fruit all through the year.

'Princess Sītā, when you live there with me, you shall have so much fun that you will forget all about mortals. You shall enjoy human and celestial pleasures and soon forget about that mortal Rāma who is as good as dead! King Daśaratha placed his favourite son on the throne and exiled the eldest, Rāma, because he was weak! You should not reject me, I am the king of the *rākṣasas*! Struck by the arrows of love and driven by passion, I came to you because I wanted to!'

'If you so much as touch me,' blazed Sītā, her eyes red with anger, 'you might as well have drunk poison!'

Rāvaṇa rubbed his hands together and reverted to his natural form. 'Crazy woman!' he said harshly. 'You were obviously not listening when I told you about my power

and strength. I can stand in the sky and lift the earth in my hands! I can kill Death in battle!'

Rāvaṇa's eyes blazed red like the setting sun and were as bright as fire. He had thrown off the disguise of the gentle ascetic and appeared in his true form which was as terrifying as Death, and stood there with his ten heads and his bright jewels. 'Lovely lady, if you want a husband who is known in the three worlds, then come to me! I am worthy of you! Give yourself to me and I shall be worthy of your love. I will never do anything that makes you unhappy. Give up your attachment to this wretched mortal and turn your affections to me. You think of yourself as wise, but you are very foolish. How can you remain attached to a man who has given up his kingdom, who cannot accomplish his goals and whose days are numbered?'

Speaking brutally to gentle Sītā who deserved only kindness, Rāvaṇa grabbed her roughly. With his right hand, he caught her by the hair and he placed his left arm under her knees. The forest deities fled in terror when they saw Rāvaṇa with his great arms and huge teeth. Rāvaṇa's golden chariot appeared, drawn by braying donkeys. Rāvaṇa lifted Sītā by the waist and ranted on as he placed her in the chariot.

Virtuous Sītā cried out to Rāma who was far away in the forest. She screamed like a mad woman in her anguish, as Rāvaṇa flew into the sky with her. 'Oh mighty Lakṣmaṇa! You who live to please your older brother! You have no idea that I am being carried off by this *rākṣasa* who can change his shape at will!

'Oh Rāma! You would sacrifice life and happiness for

dharma, but you cannot see that I am being abducted by this unrighteous creature! You are the chastiser of the wicked and the destroyer of your enemies! Why can't you punish wicked Rāvaṇa?

'Flowering trees of Janasthāna! I beg you, tell Rāma as soon as you can that Sītā was carried off by Rāvaṇa! Mighty mountain Prasravaṇa, covered with flowers, I beg you, tell Rāma that Sītā has been carried away by Rāvaṇa! Creatures of the forest, tell my husband, who loves me more than his own life, that Sītā was beside herself with grief as Rāvaṇa carried her off! When mighty Rāma hears what has happened, he will come to reclaim me, no matter where I am!'

The enormous bird Jaṭāyu was dozing gently nearby, but he woke when he heard the screams and saw Rāvaṇa and Sītā. Best of all birds, Jaṭāyu was the size of a mountain and had a sharp beak. He spoke sweetly to Rāvaṇa from his perch on the tree.

'Ten-headed Rāvaṇa, I am Jaṭāyu, the king of the vultures. I am strong and mighty and honourable and I cleave to the eternal *dharma*. Rāma, the son of Daśaratha, is the lord of all the worlds. Equal to Varuṇa and Indra, he is devoted to the welfare of all beings. This woman you are abducting is his wife, she is the best of all women.

'How can a righteous king carry off another man's wife? The wives of kings should be especially protected, mighty one! Rid yourself of this base desire! Rāma has not harmed you, or your city or your kingdom. Why do you want to harm him? If Rāma killed Khara in battle in Janasthāna, it was because the *rākṣasa* transgressed the bounds of his duty for Śūrpanakhā's sake. Rāma never does anything

wrong. What was Rāma's crime, that you feel compelled to abduct Sītā? Release this large-eyed woman at once, or Rāma will consume you with the fire of his eyes.

'I am sixty thousand years old now, Rāvaṇa. You are young. You are mounted on a chariot, clad in a coat of mail and armed with a bow and arrows. Despite that, you cannot carry Sītā off so easily! If you are truly brave, step out for a moment! You, too, shall lie dead on the ground like Khara! You shall not succeed in abducting this lotus-eyed lady, Rāma's beloved wife, as long as I am alive! Wait and watch Rāvaṇa! I shall pluck you from your chariot like a fruit from a tree!'

Rāvaṇa's golden earrings glittered and his twenty eyes turned red with rage. The king of the *rākṣasas* pounced on the great bird and a huge battle ensued in the sky between the two mighty beings, like the clash of winged clouds.

Rāvaṇa rained iron-tipped arrows upon Jaṭāyu, but the king of the birds caught them all. He wounded the *rākṣasa* several times with his talons and sharp beak. He shattered Rāvaṇa's bow and destroyed his chariot, biting off the head of his charioteer and also the heads of the donkeys that were yoked to it. Rāvaṇa fell to the ground, still holding Sītā on his lap.

Rāvaṇa noticed that the aged bird was tiring and gleefully he rose into the air again, taking Sītā with him. But Jaṭāyu pursued him and threw himself on Rāvaṇa's back. He dug his talons into the *rākṣasa* and mauled him all over, riding him as if he were a rogue elephant. He bit off Rāvaṇa's ten right arms with his beak. Rāvaṇa attacked the bird with his fists and feet. But even though Jaṭāyu

fought harder and harder for Rāma's sake, Rāvaṇa cut off his wings and his feet with his sword. The wingless bird fell to the earth, scarcely a breath left in his body. Sītā ran to him and wept as she would for a member of her own family.

Rāvaṇa, king of the *rākṣasas*, pounced on Sītā as she wept, her clothes crumpled and her ornaments in disarray. 'Let go! Let go!' he shouted as she clung to the trees like a climbing vine and rolled on the ground. 'Rāma! Rāma!' she wailed in that empty forest as the *rākṣasa* who looked like Death pulled her by the hair and called his own death upon his head.

Rāvaṇa dragged her into the sky as she cried out to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. With her glowing, golden skin and her clothes of yellow silk, the princess looked like a bolt of lightning from Mount Sudāma. As her yellow garments fluttered in the wind and the red lotuses from her garland scattered over him, Rāvaṇa's face blazed like a mountain on fire. Golden Sītā held tight against Rāvaṇa's black body was like a golden belt around an enormous black elephant.

Sītā's flowers fell from her body as she was being dragged away and they showered upon the earth like rain. They seemed to follow Rāvaṇa like a train, pulled along by the speed of his flight. The flowers followed him like the garland of stars which follows Mount Meru. As Rāvaṇa carried her further into the sky, Sītā shone with her own splendour like a comet. Her necklace of sparkling pearls slipped between her breasts and fell to the earth, like Gangā descending from the sky.

The speed of their flight disturbed the treetops. The birds nesting there seemed to call out to Sītā not to be

afraid. The lotus pools, filled with drooping flowers and agitated fish, seemed to mourn as if for a lost friend. Lions and tigers and other forest animals gathered from all over and ran behind Sītā, following her shadow on the ground. Even the mountains seemed to weep, their waterfalls like tears, their peaks like outstretched arms. The sun turned pale and dimmed his lustre as Sītā was being carried off.

Sītā looked around desperately for someone to help her but she could see no one. As they flew over a mountain, she noticed five gigantic monkeys sitting on its peak. Sītā tossed her yellow shawl and her jewels among them, hoping that they would tell Rāma. In his excitement, Rāvaṇa did not notice this. But the huge monkeys, with their yellow unblinking eyes, watched as the weeping Sītā was carried off.

Rāvaṇa crossed Pampā and went towards Lankā. His heart full of joy, he held on to the woman who was to be his death as one might carry a sharp-fanged poisonous snake. He sped like an arrow over forests and rivers, mountains and lakes, until he reached the ocean, the home of Varuṇa, the refuge of all rivers and the abode of fish and crocodiles. The ocean was frightened when it saw Sītā and it stilled its waves, freezing the fish and the other water creatures into immobility. In the sky, the *siddhas* and *cāraṇas* whispered to each other, 'This will be the death of Rāvaṇa!'

Meanwhile, Rāvaṇa reached the beautiful city of Lankā with Sītā in his arms and entered his own apartments. 'Let no man or woman see Sītā without my permission!' he ordered the *piśacīs*. 'And whatever she wants—pearls, gold, jewels, clothes—let her have them at once, as if I

myself were asking for them! Anyone who says anything to upset her, consciously or accidentally, can consider themselves as good as dead!'

Rāvaṇa, king of the *rākṣasas*, left his apartments and wondered what he should do next. As he was thinking about this, he happened to notice eight valiant *rākṣasas* who lived on human flesh. Arrogant because of the boons that he had been given, Rāvaṇa began to praise them. 'Arm yourselves and go to Janasthāna, where Khara lived before it was destroyed. That area has now been cleansed of *rākṣasas*. You can stay there without fear, relying on your strength. My army which was stationed there was slain in battle by Rāma's arrows and so were Khara and Dūṣaṇa.

'I am angrier than I have ever been and my wrath is greater, even, than my courage! The massacre has also led to the bitter enmity with Rāma. I have to kill my enemy. I shall not sleep a wink until I have slain him in battle! Go and stay in Janasthāna. Keep an eye on Rāma and tell me all that he does!'

The eight *rākṣasas* were pleased with the praises showered upon them and were eager to perform the task ahead of them. They left Lankā together immediately, without being seen.

And Rāvaṇa, now that he had captured Sītā and purchased Rāma's enmity along with that, was full of joy, delighting in his folly.

Rāvaṇa believed that he had achieved his life's goal. Helpless with love, his mind turned again to Sītā and he went back to his apartments eagerly, to see her. The king of the *rākṣasas* entered the palace and there, surrounded by *rākṣasīs*, he saw the grieving Sītā. Her face was stained

with tears and the weight of her sorrows made her pathetic. Utterly helpless, she was like a tiny boat on the open seas, tossed about by storm winds. She hung her head, like a doe that has strayed from the herd and is surrounded by hunting hounds.

Rāvaṇa forced her, vulnerable and unwilling, to see his palace, which was like the abode of the gods. Its huge buildings were studded with gems of all kinds and inhabited by thousands of women and many types of beautiful birds. It had pillars of gold and silver and crystal which were inlaid with diamonds and lapis and dazzled the eye. Rāvaṇa climbed a flight of stairs made of beaten gold with Sītā, and they resounded with each footstep like celestial drums. Its arches were decorated with exquisite silver and ivory lattices. Rāvaṇa pointed out the floors inset with pearls and showed Sītā the lotus pools surrounded by flowering trees.

'There are thirty-two million *rākṣasas* here, not including the sick, the old and children,' he boasted, after he had shown Sītā the entire palace. 'Each and every one of them is fierce and terrible. Sītā, I am the lord and master of all these forbidding creatures. I have one thousand of them just to wait on me personally! I give you my kingdom and all this, large-eyed lady, because you are dearer to me than my life! You can do what you want with it.

'Ah beloved! Become my wife and mistress of the thousands of women in my harem. Listen to me, for I mean well. What will you gain by doing otherwise? I burn with desire for you, submit to me! Lankā is one hundred *yojanās* long and is surrounded on all sides by the ocean. Not even the gods led by Indra can beseige it or capture it!

'There is no one in the three worlds who is my equal in strength and courage. What are you doing with that mortal Rāma? He has little power and no kingdom. He lives the life of an ascetic and will soon die! Give yourself to me, Sītā, I am a worthy husband for you! The days of our youth are short, enjoy them with me while you can!

'Do not be ashamed, thinking that this is a violation of *dharma*. Our union is destined and it has the sanction of the *ṛṣis*. Look, I lay my ten heads at your delicate feet. I am your slave. Be gracious to me! Rāvaṇa has never ever placed his heads at the feet of a woman! I have never debased myself like this before, these humble words arise from my anguish.' As he spoke and placed his heads within the noose of death, Rāvaṇa thought triumphantly to himself, 'She is mine!'

Vulnerable and anguished, Sītā placed a blade of grass between herself and Rāvaṇa. 'King Daśaratha upheld *dharma* and everyone knew him as an honourable man. Rāma is his righteous son and his glory has spread throughout the three worlds,' she said to Rāvaṇa. 'That powerful man with large eyes is my husband, he is like a god to me. Born in the line of the Ikṣvākus, he is brave and has shoulders as mighty as a lion's. He and his brother Lakṣmaṇa will surely kill you!

'If you had tried to abduct me in his presence, you would now be lying dead in Janasthāna, just like Khara! You may be invulnerable to the gods and the *asuras*, Rāvaṇa, but now that you have sought Rāma's enmity, you will not escape alive. Rāma will take what remains of your life. You have as much chance of survival as a sacrificial animal tied to a stake!

'Just as a *caṇḍāla* cannot touch the sanctified pots and ladles and the fire-altar for the sacrifice, so, too, you cannot touch me, you base *rākṣasa*! I am Rāma's lawful and virtuous wife! You can imprison and injure this corporeal body of mine. I have no desire to protect my body or my life. What I cannot bear is the shame that has been heaped upon me!' she said angrily.

'Listen to me, Sītā!' said Rāvaṇa, trying to intimidate her. 'If you do not submit to me in the next twelve months, my cooks will chop you up for my breakfast!'

Rāvaṇa turned to the *rākṣasīs*. 'You fierce and deformed creatures who live on flesh and blood must crush her pride!' he said. The *rākṣasīs* joined their palms and gathered around Sītā. Stamping his feet as if he would smash the earth to pieces, Rāvaṇa said, 'Take Sītā to the *aśoka* grove and guard her zealously, safe from prying eyes. Threaten her and cajole her alternately, the way wild elephants are tamed. Convince her that she must accede to my wishes!'

The *rākṣasīs* surrounded Sītā and took her to the *aśoka* grove. The grove was filled with trees which bore every kind of fruit and flower and were visited by birds all the year round. But in the hands of the *rākṣasīs*, Sītā was like a doe surrounded by tigers. Overwhelmed with grief and terrified by those ugly creatures, she found no peace in the *aśoka* grove. Her mind was constantly on her god-like husband.

seven

Meanwhile, Rāma had killed the form-changing *rākṣasa* Mārīca who had been wandering around as a deer, and was hurrying back to his settlement. As he was returning, anxious to see Sītā, a jackal howled behind him. Rāma recognized that hair-raising sound and grew worried. 'This is terrible! The cry of a jackal is a bad omen! I hope all is well with Sītā and that the *rākṣasas* have not been harassing her. If Lakṣmaṇa heard Mārīca cry out in my voice while he was disguised as a deer, he will have left Sītā alone, on her insistence, and come after me. I just hope they are both all right without me. I have earned the enmity of the *rākṣasas* after the incident at Janasthāna. Oh dear! I see more and more bad omens!'

Worrying about the omens and the fact that he had been drawn away, Rāma reached Janasthāna, full of anxiety. Birds and animals saw the agitated Rāma coming and they ran around him, calling out in harsh voices. Rāma considered that a bad omen too. Before long, he saw Lakṣmaṇa, downcast and miserable. Soon, they were face to face, both of them anxious and upset.

The older brother berated the younger one for leaving Sītā alone in a forest overrun with *rākṣasas*. 'Ah Lakṣmaṇa!

You should not have left Sītā alone and come here!' said Rāma as he took Lakṣmaṇa by the right hand. But his strong words were softened by the gentleness with which they were uttered. 'Will we find everything all right when we reach home? I feel certain that Sītā has been either devoured or abducted by the *rākṣasas* that wander through this forest. I see evil omens all around me. I can only hope that Sītā is safe and sound!

'That deer which led me far away was actually a *rākṣasa* that deceived me. It was only when I killed him that he revealed his true form. My left eye twitches, my mind is uneasy. Lakṣmaṇa, I fear that we shall find Sītā either missing or dead!

'If I go back to our settlement and Sītā is not there to welcome me with her sweet smile and her gentle words, I shall kill myself,' continued Rāma. 'Tell me, Lakṣmaṇa, is she alive? Or has she been eaten by *rākṣasas* because of your carelessness? She is young and not used to these hardships. She must have been frightened and lonely while I was gone. Even you must have been frightened when that wicked *rākṣasa* called your name in my voice!

'I have a feeling Sītā was frightened when she heard that voice, so like mine, and she sent you out to look for me. But whatever it was, you should not have left her alone, giving the *rākṣasas* a chance to take revenge on me! The *rākṣasas* are incensed over the killing of Khara. I am sure that they have eaten Sītā.'

Hurrying on with his brother, Rāma was pale and out of breath, tired, hungry and thirsty. He reached the settlement and found no one there. He went straight to the hut and then to all the places in which he and Sītā had

enjoyed themselves and been so happy. He grew more and more agitated as he saw that they were all empty.

'I did not leave Sītā alone because I wanted to,' said Lakṣmaṇa miserably. 'I came to look for you because she goaded me with her sharp words. When that voice that sounded like yours called out to us, I told her not to panic, as weak-minded women are wont to do. "There is no creature in the three worlds, born or unborn, who can defeat Rāma in combat," I said to her. But she became angry and began to cry and, in her confusion, she said to me, "You have improper feelings towards me. You want to have me when your brother is dead, but that will never happen! Since you do not go after him it means that you are hatching a plot with Bharata. You followed Rāma into the forest because of me and you are delighting in his misfortunes!"

'I was very angry when she spoke to me thus. My lips trembled and I stalked out of the settlement.'

'You did wrong, dear brother,' insisted Rāma. 'You knew that I was capable of defeating the *rākṣasas* and still you left her, just because of her angry words. It does not please me that you came away just because an angry woman spoke to you harshly!'

Rāma looked all over the settlement. Without Sītā, the trees there seemed to weep, the birds and animals appeared downcast. It was as if the forest deities had abandoned the area. Deerskins and reed mats had been scattered and *kuśa* grass lay everywhere. Rāma called out to Sītā again and again. 'She has been abducted! She is dead! She has been eaten! Or, perhaps, the poor, frightened thing went and hid in the forest! Maybe she went out to collect roots

and fruits! Or to the lotus pond, or to the river!'

But though he searched high and low, Rāma could not find his beloved in the forest. His eyes red from weeping, he seemed like a madman as he ran from tree to tree, from the mountains to the river, weeping more and more as he plunged deeper and deeper into an ocean of grief.

'O *kadamba* tree, have you seen my beloved who loved your fruit so? Tell me if you know where that lovely woman is! *Bilva* tree, where is she, the woman whose breasts are like your fruits, who is as delicate as your new shoots in her yellow silks? O palm tree, take pity on me and tell me if you have seen that beautiful woman! Rose-apple tree, my beloved's complexion has the hues of your fruit. You must have seen her. Tell me where she is!

'Little deer, you must know where the doe-eyed Sītā is! Is she with you in the forest? O best of elephants, Sītā had thighs like your trunk, you must know where she is! O Lakṣmaṇa, have you seen my beloved anywhere? Oh Sītā! My darling Sītā, where have you gone?' he cried over and over again.

Rāma called out as he ran hither and thither in the forest. He leapt and jumped and spun around as if he were crazy. He could not stand still for a moment, so he ran through the forest, over the mountains and down to the streams and rivers. But though he searched every corner of that forest, he found no trace of his beloved. Still, he would not give up and renewed his efforts to find her.

Utterly miserable, Rāma said wretchedly to Lakṣmaṇa, 'Go to the river Godāvarī quickly and see if Sītā went there to gather lotuses.' When Lakṣmaṇa did not find her, Rāma went there himself.

Equally upset, the two brothers walked along. Suddenly, they saw a trail of flowers on the ground. 'I recognize these flowers, Lakṣmaṇa,' said Rāma when he saw them. 'I gave them to Sītā in the forest and she braided them into her hair!' Looking further, Rāma found the huge foot print of a *rākṣasa*. His heart hammering in his chest, Rāma called out to his brother. 'Look, Lakṣmaṇa, there are all kinds of flowers scattered here and little bits of gold from Sītā's broken ornaments! The ground is covered with drops of blood that gleam like gold. Sītā must have been torn to pieces by form-changing *rākṣasas*, or she must have been eaten by them!'

'These signs suggest that there was a great battle here between two mighty *rākṣasas* over Sītā. Look at this broken bow, this shattered armour and royal umbrella, these dead donkeys with *piśāca* faces, this wrecked chariot and scattered arrows!

'My hostility towards the *rākṣasas* has now multiplied a hundred times. I shall kill all these form-changing *rākṣasas*! If Sītā has been devoured or abducted, Lakṣmaṇa, there is no one in all the worlds who would dare challenge me! Perhaps the gods think I am a weakling because I am gentle and compassionate and devoted to the well-being of all creatures! Even this virtue has become a flaw in my character! But today I will show the *rākṣasas* and all the other creatures my true powers!

'The *yakṣas*, the *gandharvas*, the *piśācas* or *rākṣasas*, the *kinnaras* and mortals shall not have a moment's happiness, Lakṣmaṇa! I shall fill the sky with my arrows and missiles, making it impassable for all those who travel through the three worlds. I shall stop the planets in their

orbits, obstruct the course of the moon, destroy the fire and the wind, eclipse the radiance of the sun. I shall smash the mountain peaks, dry up the lakes, uproot trees and creepers and bushes and stir up the waters of the ocean!

'If the gods do not deliver Sītā to me unharmed, they will see the kind of destruction I can wreak in a single hour! There will not be a single god, *dānava*, *daitya*, *piśāca* or *rākṣasa* left when I have finished destroying the three worlds in my anger. Even as old age, sickness, death and fate cannot be escaped, so, too, I cannot be diverted from my purpose! If the gods do not return Sītā to me, sweet and smiling as she was before, I will destroy the universe along with the gods, *gandharvas*, mortals and serpents!'

Lakṣmaṇa had never seen Rāma so angry before. His mouth dry with fear, he joined his palms and said, 'Rāma, you have always been gentle and compassionate and devoted to the welfare of all creatures. Do not let your anger control you and make you act against your natural disposition.

'I do not know whose chariot this is that lies here, smashed to bits. I have no idea who used it and for what purpose. The earth has been gouged by chariot wheels and hooves and the ground is splattered with blood. Clearly, a battle was fought here. But I think there was only one chariot and not two.

'You cannot destroy the worlds because of the crimes of a single person. Great kings mete out punishments judiciously and dispassionately. Armed with your bow and arrow and with me by your side, we can find out what happened to Sītā with the help of the *ṛṣis*. We shall scour the oceans, the mountains and the forests, the caves,

the rivers and the woods. We shall search through the worlds of the gods and the *gandharvas* without rest until we find your wife's abductor!

'And after all that, if the gods do not restore your wife to you, then, O king of Kosalā, it will be time for you to take action! If you cannot get Sītā back through diplomacy and conciliation, then you can achieve your ends through a rain of gold-tipped arrows that fall like Indra's thunderbolt!'

Even though he was the older brother, Rāma took Lakṣmaṇa's wise and judicious advice seriously. He controlled his anger and leaning on his great bow, he said, 'What shall we do now, Lakṣmaṇa? Where shall we go next? Think about how we can find Sītā.'

'We should first look carefully here in Janasthāna which is full of trees and teeming with *rākṣasas*. There are many mountainous places here that are hard to reach, as well as clefts and hollows in the rocks and caves that are homes of fierce wild animals,' said Lakṣmaṇa. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa searched the entire forest. Rāma was still angry and he carried his great bow fitted with a sharp and deadly arrow.

Suddenly, they came upon the bird Jaṭāyu, huge as a mountain, lying on the ground, drenched in blood. 'I am sure Sītā has been devoured by this thing here!' said Rāma when he saw that enormous creature. 'This is a *rākṣasa* who has taken the form of a vulture to wander through these forests. He has eaten large-eyed Sītā and now he lies here resting! I shall kill him with my fiery arrows!'

Rāma fitted the arrows into his bow and approached the bird with a tread that would have stirred up the ocean.

But the bird addressed the sorrowing Rāma, vomiting frothy blood as he spoke. 'The woman you search for like a rare herb in the forest has been carried away by Rāvaṇa who has taken my life as well! I saw her being abducted against her will while you and Lakṣmaṇa were gone. I rushed to her rescue and fought with Rāvaṇa. I destroyed his chariot which lies there on the ground. Rāvaṇa cut off my wings with his sword when I grew tired and flew into the sky with Sītā. You don't have to shoot me, the *rākṣasa* has already killed me!'

When Rāma heard this news about his wife, he embraced the bird along with Lakṣmaṇa and began to weep. He was deeply distressed to see Jaṭāyu lying on a narrow path, having difficulty breathing. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa caressed the dying, wingless, bloodied bird with affection, as if he were their child. 'Where shall I find Sītā?' cried Rāma and threw himself upon the ground.

Then he turned and spoke to Lakṣmaṇa. 'This bird made such a tremendous effort for my sake and was struck down in battle. Now he has to give up his life, which most creatures cling to. His voice quavers and he sees but dimly. There is still some life in his body but he is weak and feeble. Jaṭāyu, if you can still speak, tell me about Sītā and how you were wounded.

'Why did Rāvaṇa take Sītā away? What harm have I ever done him that he should abduct my beloved? What does he look like? How strong is he? What can he do? Where does he live? Answer these questions if you can, dear bird!'

Jaṭāyu told Rāma in great detail how he had been struck down. 'Do not grieve for Sītā!' he continued. 'It won't be

long before you kill this *rākṣasa* in battle and enjoy the pleasures of Sītā's company once again,' said the dying bird whose mind was still lucid. Then he vomited more blood and bits of flesh. 'The son of Viśravas and the brother of Kubera,' began the bird, but his breath left him and he died.

'Tell me, tell me!' begged Rāma with his palms joined but the bird's soul had left his body and gone to heaven. His head fell to the ground, his legs sprawled forward and his body jerked violently.

'This mighty bird died for my sake!' said Rāma to Lakṣmaṇa. 'Even among the lower orders of beings there are those who are virtuous, honourable and brave, who are the refuge of the weak and helpless. Even the sadness of Sītā's abduction does not match the grief I feel at the death of this bird who died for me!

'He is as worthy of honour and respect as my father Daśaratha. Collect some wood, Lakṣmaṇa, and I shall start a fire. We must cremate the king of the vultures. Mighty bird, you shall enjoy worlds of incomparable bliss with the last rites that I perform for you!' Rāma placed the bird's body on a blazing pyre and cremated him, mourning as he would for a member of his family.

The two brothers went further south through the forest, looking for Sītā. Secure in their prowess, they scoured the forest when, suddenly, there was a huge sound that seemed to tear the forest apart. The trees were agitated as if by storm winds and the huge sound filled the sky.

Armed with their bows and arrows, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa tried to find out where the sound had come from and came upon an immense *rākṣasa* with a huge

chest. As they came closer, they saw what appeared to be a headless torso. Its mouth was on its belly and it was covered with short spiky hair. The size of a mountain and dark as a rain cloud, the torso rumbled like thunder. There was one huge yellow eye with a red eyelid in the middle of its forehead which was stuck on its chest.

The *rākṣasa*, Kabandha, had enormous arms, each of them one *yojanā* long, and he swept the air with them, gathering bears and flocks of birds and herds of deer into his mouth. The *rākṣasa* stretched his arms to their fullest extent and grabbed Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Even though they were strong and brave and armed with swords and bows, the brothers were utterly helpless against this powerful force.

Kabandha saw that the brothers were trapped in his arms as if they were in the noose of death and said, 'Why are you standing there, mighty kṣatriyas? Can't you see that I am ravenous? Fate has sent you to me. Consider yourselves dead!'

The two brothers knew what was appropriate for time and place and they hacked off his arms at the shoulder, experiencing great delight as they did so. Rāma faced no resistance as he swiftly cut off Kabandha's left arm. Lakṣmaṇa took off his right arm with his sword.

The *rākṣasa* fell to the ground and his howls filled the earth, the sky and the four quarters. Looking at his bloodied, severed arms, the *rākṣasa* asked humbly, 'Who are you?'

'This is the famous Rāma, born in the line of the Ikṣvākus,' said auspicious Lakṣmaṇa, 'and I am his younger brother Lakṣmaṇa. While this god-like man was living in

the deserted forest, his wife was abducted by a *rākṣasa*. We have come here in search of her. But who are you and what are you doing in the forest, a headless torso, struggling on the ground?'

'Welcome, best of men!' the *rākṣasa* responded with joy, and proceeded to tell Lakṣmaṇa all that Indra had told him. 'It is my great good fortune that you came here. These arms were my bonds and you have severed them. Listen and I will tell you how I came to have this terrifying form because of my arrogance and pride.

'Long ago, Rāma, I was handsome and strong and famous in all the three worlds. I was as beautiful as the sun and the moon, as beautiful as Indra, even! But I would take on this hideous shape and harass the world, especially the *ṛṣis* of the forest. One day, when I was in this form, I angered the sage Sthūlaśiras while he was collecting food in the forest. He looked straight at me and uttered this terrible curse: "This cruel and wicked form shall stay with you!" I pleaded with him to pronounce an end to the curse which I had brought upon myself and he said, "When Rāma cuts off your arms and cremates you in the deserted forest, then your original beauty will be restored to you."

'And so I would eat all that I could in the hope that one day I would find you. I will help you in any way that I can. When you have cremated me, I shall tell you where to find an ally!'

'When my brother and I were away from Janasthāna, the *rākṣasa* Rāvaṇa carried off my lovely wife with facile ease,' said Rāma. 'I only know the *rākṣasa's* name. I do not know what he looks like, where he lives or how powerful he is. It would be wonderful if you would

sympathize and help us. We have no allies and we have been wandering from place to place in search of Sītā, overwhelmed with grief.

'We will return the favour. We shall gather dry wood which has been brushed off trees by passing elephants and cremate you in a big pit that we shall dig. Tell us who abducted Sītā. It will be a great favour if you tell us where she has been taken.'

'I have no divine knowledge now and I know nothing about Sītā,' said Kabandha. 'But when you cremate me and I regain my original form, I will be able to tell you about someone who has all this information.'

The brothers carried Kabandha to a hollow and there, with flaming torches, Lakṣmaṇa lit the pyre. It soon broke into a roaring blaze. Kabandha's enormous body was like a mound of fat and the fire consumed it slowly. Scattering the pyre, Kabandha rose like a flame, wearing shining white clothes and a garland of celestial flowers, adorned with jewels all over his body. He leapt off the pyre joyfully, blazing with splendour.

'Listen, Rāma, and I will tell you how to get Sītā back!' he said. 'You and Lakṣmaṇa are vulnerable and have fallen into adverse circumstances. That is why it was easy for your wife to be abducted. You must acquire a friend and ally. I can see no way for you to achieve your ends without one.

'There is a monkey named Sugrīva who was displaced by his brother Vālī, the son of Indra, in a fit of anger. With his four monkey companions, he lives on the Ṛṣyamūka mountain whose beauty is enhanced by Lake Pampā. Sugrīva is strong and brave.

'Leave here immediately, Rāma, and make friends with Sugrīva, with fire as a witness to your mutual loyalty. That mighty king of the monkeys is brave and he can change his shape at will. Do not slight him, Rāma. He needs your help and he will be ever grateful for it. Together, you can achieve his ends, but he will help you even if his task is not accomplished. He knows all there is to know about any place over which the sun shines. He will search the rivers, the mountains and the deep caves with his monkeys and he will find your wife. He will send his mighty monkeys in all directions to find Sītā who is pining in her separation from you!'

'Go west from here, through the forest and over the hills, until you reach Pampā, the lake which teems with fish and is surrounded by flowering trees. Mount Ṛṣyamūka lies to the east of the lake,' continued Kabandha. 'There is a cave in that mountain which is impossible to enter, for its mouth is closed by a rock. On the eastern side of the cave is a large pool of cool water. The area abounds in roots and fruits and all kinds of animals gather there. That is where Sugrīva lives with his monkey companions. Sometimes, he can be found on the summit of the mountain.'

These were the directions that splendid Kabandha gave Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as he stood in the sky with his celestial garland. 'Go forward,' he said, 'and may your mission be successful!' Shining like the sun in his rightful form, Kabandha called out again from the sky, 'Make an alliance with Sugrīva!' and went on his way.

eight

Finally, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa arrived at lotus-covered Pampā, but Rāma was still depressed. Even though a tremor of delight ran through his body when he saw Pampā, he found that his thoughts turned to his beloved.

'Ah, Lakṣmaṇa! How beautiful these trees are that surround Pampā,' he said. 'They are as tall as the mountains, their heights as dazzling as mountain peaks! I am already grieving over Bharata's sadness and Sītā's abduction and I find that this lovely place makes me even more unhappy. This gentle breeze! This season! The mind turns to thoughts of love, Lakṣmaṇa! The spring air is fragrant and all the trees burst forth in fruits and flowers. Look at how the woods bloom! The wind scatters flowers all over the ground and the trees shower blossoms like clouds shower rain! But this same breeze can be gentle and soothe us with its touch, cool and fragrant as sandalpaste!

'The spring-time air, filled as it is with the songs of birds, sharpens my sorrow at the separation from Sītā. My body is consumed by passion and the *koel* mocks me with its happy song! And that bird that calls from near the waterfall! It fills me with sadness, for I am caught in

the grip of passion! I am already so oppressed by my grief, yet doe-eyed Sītā torments me further with her absence, like this cruel breeze. The peahen who walks with her mate on the hillside overwhelms me with emotion.

'Ah! My sweet-voiced beloved must be suffering as much as I am! The cool, gentle breezes burn me like a fire, they make me think of my beloved Sītā. These birds that brought me the news of Sītā's abduction should lead me to her now. When I look at the petals on the blossoming lotus buds, I think of Sītā's eyes. The breeze that has brushed against flowers as it comes through the trees reminds me of Sītā's sweet breath!'

Thus did Rāma lament as he and Lakṣmaṇa looked everywhere for Sītā, even inside caves and behind waterfalls, and his heart grew heavier with sorrow and despair.

Sugrīva saw those two mighty heroes as they approached the vicinity of the Ṛṣyamūka mountain and his mind was filled with dread. He noticed that the brothers were well-armed and that made him very suspicious. Deeply disturbed, he looked around him but could not find a place to hide. Keeping an eye on the heroes, he found that he was restless, unable to sit in one place or decide what to do, and fear gripped his heart. Agitated and confused, Sugrīva discussed the matter with his companions and explained to them why he was so frightened.

'Those two men have definitely been sent here by Vālī to spy on us! They are wearing these rough clothes and wandering in the forests just to hide their identity!'

Sugrīva's companions looked at Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa

armed with their bows and arrows and fled to another peak. There, they gathered around their leader, the best of monkeys, and together, they leapt from peak to peak, shaking the earth with the force and speed of their movements. The powerful monkeys toppled flowering trees on the slopes as they raced all over the mountain, disturbing deer, wild cats and tigers. They reassembled on the very top of the mountain and stood before their leader with their palms joined in respect.

Sugrīva was quaking with fear at the thought of what Vālī might have planned, but the eloquent Hanumān spoke to him reasonably. 'Bull among monkeys, I cannot see cruel and fierce Vālī anywhere here! And yet, you have been running all over the place in fear of him! Your wicked brother, whom you fear so much, is nowhere to be seen, my friend, and I see no cause for alarm! Unfortunately, you have just displayed your essential monkey nature! Your mind is so flighty and distracted that you cannot even sit in one place and consider the situation calmly. You are wise and intelligent and should be able to read the motives of other people and act accordingly. A king who does not use his intelligence cannot rule his people properly.'

Sugrīva listened to Hanumān's sensible words and his response was equally well-reasoned. 'Those god-like men with their mighty arms, their lotus-petal eyes and their bows and arrows and swords would make anyone apprehensive! I feel sure that Vālī has sent out these mighty men. Kings have many friends and we should not become complacent! One must be able to detect disguised enemies. Men such as these are always alert, they strike the complacent when the right moment presents itself.

'Mighty Hanumān! Disguise yourself as an ordinary man and go and meet them! Find out all you can through their mode of dress and speech, their manners and their conduct. Examine their feelings and attitudes. If they seem friendly, gain their confidence by flattering them with praises and pleasant words! Position yourself such that I can see you and then ask them why they have come to this forest armed with bows and arrows.'

Hanumān leapt off the Ṛṣyamūka mountain, fully understanding what Sugrīva wanted, and landed close to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. He threw off his own form and approached them in the guise of a mendicant. He addressed them in a sweet voice, praising them, as had been planned. 'Your glowing skin makes you look like kings, or royal sages, or resolute ascetics! What brings you to this region? You disturb the deer and other forest animals as you wander along the wooded shores of Pampā. You enhance the brilliance of these sparkling waters with your shining skin! But who are you, dressed like this in the clothes of ascetics? You seem to have the valour of lions. You are armed with bows that rival Indra's, you are as handsome and powerful as bulls, your arms are as mighty as elephants' trunks, and you radiate energy!

'Your splendour lights up the mountain. But you, who are comparable to the gods, should be ruling a kingdom. What are you doing here? You are clearly warriors, but your eyes are like lotus petals and you have the matted locks of ascetics! You bear a close resemblance to each other and seem to have come from the realm of the gods, like the sun and the moon come to earth by chance! Why is it that your massive arms are not adorned with jewelled

ornaments as they should be? You seem capable of ruling the entire earth with the oceans and forests and mountains like Meru and Vindhya that adorn it! Why are you so silent despite my many questions?

'There is a righteous monkey here named Sugrīva and he is the lord of the monkey clans. He was unfairly treated by his brother and now wanders the earth in sorrow. My name is Hanumān and I have been sent here by Sugrīva who is regarded as king by many of the important monkeys. I am the son of the Wind, and I am Sugrīva's advisor. Honourable Sugrīva wishes to make friends with you! I can take any form that I choose and I can go anywhere I want! I have come here from the Ṛṣyamūka mountain in the form of a mendicant to carry out Sugrīva's instructions!' Knowing that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were perceptive enough to understand his meaning, the eloquent Hanumān fell silent.

'This is Sugrīva's minister!' said Rāma in delight to his brother who stood beside him. 'I have been looking for that great king of the monkeys and he has found me instead! This advisor has been friendly and eloquent. He is well-spoken and knows what to say and when to say it. Speak to him, Lakṣmaṇa!'

Hanumān was thrilled when he heard what Rāma said and his thoughts flew immediately to Sugrīva. 'Sugrīva is bound to regain his kingdom soon since Rāma has obviously come to him with a purpose!' he thought.

'What has brought you and your younger brother to these dense forests that surround Pampā, that are filled with wild animals and beasts of prey?' he asked Rāma. Lakṣmaṇa told Hanumān all about the great-souled Rāma,

son of Daśaratha.

'There was a great and celebrated king named Daśaratha who loved *dharma*. This is his renowned eldest son, Rāma. This hero is the best of all Daśaratha's sons because of his many virtues. He is the refuge of all beings and he is devoted to carrying out his father's wishes. Having been deprived of his kingdom, he came to live here with me and his wife Sītā, who accompanied him like rays follow the sun at the end of the day. I am Rāma's younger brother and my name is Lakṣmaṇa. I am devoted to Rāma because of his many virtues, his graciousness and his immense learning. Rāma, who deserves glory and every kind of happiness and is intent on the welfare of all creatures, has been deprived of his royal majesty and has come to take refuge in the forest.

'A form-changing *rākṣasa* abducted Rāma's wife in our absence. We have no idea who that *rākṣasa* was. Kabandha, who had become a *rākṣasa* because of a curse, told us that Sugrīva, the king of the monkeys, was capable of helping us. "Sugrīva is mighty and strong and he will know how to find the *rākṣasa* who abducted your wife" is what he said to us as he went to heaven, radiant and shining.

'I have now answered your questions and told you everything. Rāma and I have come here to seek Sugrīva's help. In the past, Rāma distributed huge amounts of wealth, won great fame and was the lord of the earth. Now he comes to Sugrīva for refuge. He is overwhelmed with grief and utterly distraught. Sugrīva and his monkey hordes should be gracious to him!' said Lakṣmaṇa sadly, with tears in his eyes.

'It is Sugrīva's good fortune that such wise and disciplined men as you, whom he should have sought out, have come to him!' replied Hanumān. 'He, too, has been deprived of his kingdom and Vālī has become his sworn enemy. Separated from his wife, Sugrīva wanders sadly through the forests, all because his brother treated him so unfairly. Sugrīva, son of the Sun, and all of us monkeys will definitely help you in the search for Sītā! Let us go and meet Sugrīva!' Hanumān said in his sweet and mellifluous voice.

Lakṣmaṇa honoured Hanumān and then turned to Rāma. 'This monkey, son of the Wind, is obviously very pleased with what he has heard. His happy face shines brightly and he seems to be telling the truth. Sugrīva also needs help to achieve his ends and so you can consider your mission as good as accomplished!'

Hanumān took the two princes to meet the king of the monkeys. Shining with his own splendour, the famous Hanumān was delighted with his success and reached the top of the mountain on the strength of his powerful thighs. From Ṛṣyamūka, Hanumān went to Mount Malaya and introduced Sugrīva to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

'This is the wise and resolute Rāma, exceedingly brave and honourable. He has come here with his brother Lakṣmaṇa. Born into the family of the Ikṣvākus, Rāma is the son of Daśaratha. He is known for his righteousness and for his devotion to his father's wishes. While Rāma was living a life of discipline and restraint in the forest, a *rākṣasa* abducted his wife. Now Rāma has come to you for help. Son of the king who performed all the important sacrifices correctly, who paid generous fees and distributed

cows by the hundreds of thousands, a king who ruled the earth wisely and well, such a man had to come into the forest because of a woman! Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are here to make an alliance of friendship. Treat them well, for they are the best among those who should be honoured!'

Sugrīva was pleased with what Hanumān said and his fear of Rāma left him as a fever leaves the body. He took on the form of a charming and handsome young man and spoke warmly to Rāma. 'Hanumān has rightly described all your virtues to me. Indeed, you are disciplined and firm in the practice of *dharma*, you are strong and brave and your love embraces all creatures. It is a great honour as well as a great advantage for me that you seek my friendship and that of the monkeys. Take my hand and let us enter into a firm alliance!'

Rāma took Sugrīva's outstretched hand and gripped it firmly. Pleased that he had made the alliance he wanted, Rāma embraced Sugrīva with affection. Hanumān, meanwhile, relinquished the mendicant form that he had taken on and, in his own form, gathered some wood and made a fire. He worshipped it with an offering of flowers and then, with a glad heart, he placed the blazing fire between Sugrīva and Rāma. The two of them walked around the fire to cement their new friendship, gazing at each other fondly, as if they would never tire of the sight of the other.

'My advisor Hanumān has told me how you came to live in this uninhabited forest,' said Sugrīva to Rāma, 'and also that while you were living there with your brother Lakṣmaṇa, a *rākṣasa* abducted your wife Sītā, the daughter of Janaka. The *rākṣasa* waited for the right moment and

did this in your absence. He killed the vulture Jaṭāyu as he carried your wailing wife away. But you shall not suffer this separation from your wife for long! I shall bring her back, just as the sacred scriptures were recovered! Whether she be in the highest heaven or the lowest hell, I shall bring your wife back to you! I promise you this and you can count on my word, Rāma!

'I feel sure, from logical deductions, that it was Sītā I saw being carried off by a cruel *rākṣasa*. She was crying out "Oh Rāma! Oh Lakṣmaṇa!" piteously as she writhed in Rāvaṇa's arms like a serpent. Then she saw me and four other monkeys sitting on the top of a mountain and she threw down her shawl as well as some jewelled ornaments. We caught them and have kept them safely. I shall bring them here so that you can identify them.'

'What is the delay, my friend?' urged Rāma. 'Have them brought here as soon as possible!' Eager to please Rāma, Sugrīva ran to his inaccessible cave and fetched the jewels. Rāma's eyes blurred with tears, as the moon is covered by mist, when he saw the jewels and the shawl. Overcome by his love for Sītā, he burst into tears. Crying, 'Ah! My beloved!' he threw himself on the ground. He clutched the jewels to his chest and sighed heavily, like an angry serpent hissing in its hole. His tears flowed thick and heavy and he turned to Lakṣmaṇa who stood by his side.

'Look, Lakṣmaṇa! These are the jewels and the cloth that Sītā threw from her body on to the ground as she was being carried off!' he said pathetically. 'She must have thrown them on to the grassy slopes, for the ornaments are not in the least damaged!'

'I cannot recognize her ear and hair ornaments,' said

Lakṣmaṇa. 'I only know her anklets because I would touch her feet every morning.'

'Tell me, Sugrīva,' said Rāma, 'where was this wicked *rākṣasa* taking my beloved wife, dearer to me than my own life, when you saw them? Where does that *rākṣasa* live? He has caused me so much grief that because of him, I am determined to exterminate the entire race of *rākṣasas*! Who is this creature who has opened the door of death for himself by abducting Sītā and incurring my terrible wrath? Tell me, great monkey, who was this who abducted my beloved from the forest? I shall send him to meet the god of death this very day!'

Sugrīva's eyes filled with tears and in a voice thick with emotion, he replied, 'I have no idea where that wicked creature lives. Nor do I know anything about his family or his strength and prowess. But do not grieve, I promise you that I shall make every effort to get Sītā back! I shall use all my capacities, that you will find worthy of praise, and kill Rāvaṇa and his *rākṣasa* hordes. I shall do all that it takes to please you for as long as you want! Do not succumb to this weakness. Resort to your natural fortitude and forbearance! Such behaviour is for lesser men. It does not become you!

'I, too, have suffered the terrible grief of separation from my wife. But I do not weep and lament and I have not lost heart. Even though I am only an ordinary monkey, I do not go on and on grieving. You are great-souled and self-restrained, you should be even stronger! Dry your tears! Do not lose the fortitude that governs the conduct of resolute men!

'I speak like this out of concern for the welfare of a friend, Rāma. I do not presume to teach you! Respect my friendship and renounce your sorrow!'

Somewhat comforted, Rāma wiped the tears from his face with his upper garment. Regaining his natural composure because of Sugrīva's words, Rāma embraced the monkey. 'You have fulfilled the duty of a friend who loves and wishes the best for someone,' he said. 'You have done what is right and worthy. My natural equanimity has been restored thanks to your persuasive words. It is hard to find friends as good as you, especially at a time like this!

'What do we need to do now in order to find Sītā and the vicious *rākṣasa* Rāvaṇa? And you must also tell me, without any hesitation, what I have to do to help you. Our efforts will bear fruit like seeds sown just before the rains! You can count on my word, Sugrīva! I have never spoken an untruth nor shall I ever do so! I swear this by all that is true and I shall keep my promise!'

Sugrīva and his advisors were delighted to hear Rāma's words, reinforced by his solemn oath. The man and the monkey sat and chatted intimately about all that was important to them. And the king of the monkeys knew in his heart that his ends were as good as achieved.

nine

In a voice that trembled with happiness, Sugrīva began to tell Rāma his story. 'I have been treated unfairly by my brother and because of that I have to wander around this Ṛṣyamūka mountain, bereft of my wife and stricken with fear and sorrow. I live in constant terror, distracted and disoriented by this fear of my brother Vālī who has taken all that I had and become my mortal enemy. You are the one who rids the world of fear. Take pity on me! I am terrorized by Vālī and I have no protection!'

'To help is the sign of a friend, just as to harm is the sign of an enemy!' said Rāma who knew and loved *dharma* and was a man of great power. 'Today I shall kill the monkey who took your wife away from you! You shall watch as your brother, who has done you wrong and is your enemy, is slain by my arrows as a mountain is split!'

'Good! Good!' said Sugrīva, reassured by Rāma's words. 'Rāma, I am tormented by my troubles and you are the last resort for creatures like me! I come to you with my sorrows because of our mutual alliance. I can tell you about the troubles that consume me like a fire because we are friends!' Sugrīva's eyes filled with tears and he could barely speak as they threatened to choke him. His tears

flowed like a river in spate but with a great effort he managed to staunch them. He wiped his beautiful eyes, sighed deeply and continued.

'Long ago, I was driven out of the kingdom by Vālī who was stronger and very critical of me. He stole my wife who was dearer to me than my own life and he imprisoned all my friends and well-wishers. That blackguard tried many times to destroy me and I have killed several monkeys that he sent here with that express purpose. That is why I was so suspicious when I saw you and did not move from this place! Everything is terrifying when there is a cause for fear!

'Hanumān and the others are my only companions. And though I am in a bad way, I have survived only because of them. They protect me from all sides and look after me because they love me. They go where I go and stay where I stay. This, in short, is my story, Rāma. Why go into any details? The gist of it is that my own older brother, who is known for his strength, is my deadly enemy. My sorrows will end when he is destroyed. My life and my happiness depend on his death!'

'But what is the reason for this hostility?' asked Rāma. 'I would like to hear about that! Then I will consider the matter carefully and decide upon the best way to restore you to happiness. The tale of your humiliation makes me very angry. You shall see your enemy destroyed the moment I release my arrow!'

The monkeys and Sugrīva were thrilled when they heard what Rāma said and with a lighter heart Sugrīva began to tell Rāma the whole story.

'My brother, the slayer of his enemies, is named Vālī.

In the old days, my father thought very highly of him and so did I. When my father died, Vālī was placed on the throne by the ministers because he was older and because they held him in high regard. He ruled the kingdom that has come down to us from our forefathers and I obeyed him at all times.

'Long before that, Vālī had a famous fight over a woman with Māyāvī, the oldest son of Dundubhi. One night, when everyone was asleep, Māyāvī came to the gates of Kiṣkindha and created a mighty din, challenging Vālī to a fight. My brother was also asleep but he woke when he heard that great shout and, unable to tolerate the insult, came out quickly. Determined to kill that mighty *asura*, Vālī left Kiṣkindha immediately. Even though his wives and I pleaded with him in all humility, he brushed us aside. But I followed him out of affection.

'When the *asura* saw my brother and me coming after him from a distance, he fled in terror. We both ran after him and the moon lit up our path. The *asura* ran into a crevice that was covered with grass and seemed hard to access but we followed him to the mouth of the cave. Vālī was enraged when he saw his enemy disappearing into the hole and in a frenzy he said to me, "Stand here, Sugrīva, and guard the entrance to the cave. I will go and kill this hostile creature!" I begged him to let me go with him but he made me swear that I would stay there and plunged into the cave.

'An entire year went by after he entered there and all that time I stood guard at the entrance. I saw no sign of Vālī and I assumed the worst. I presumed that he was dead and because of my affection for him, I was very upset.

I heard the shouts of the *asura* but I heard nothing from my brother who was engrossed in the fight. That made me think that my brother was dead. I covered the entrance to the cave with a rock that was as big as a mountain and after performing the funeral rites for my brother, I returned to Kiṣkindha with a heavy heart.

'Though I made every effort to hide the truth, the ministers heard what had happened and after consulting each other they crowned me king. While I was ruling the kingdom justly and well, Vālī returned, having killed the hostile *asura*. His eyes blazed with anger when he saw that I had become king. He imprisoned my councillors and berated me harshly. I could have had him thrown into prison but, out of respect for the fact that he was my older brother, I did not want to treat that wicked creature so badly. I honoured him and treated him with respect but Vālī did not invoke blessings upon me.

'I tried to placate my brother who was in a towering rage. "Thank goodness you are well and that the enemy has been destroyed! I am vulnerable and you are my only protector! Accept this fly whisk and this royal umbrella, that shines like the moon, which I shall hold over your head. You are the rightful king now, as you were before. I return to you the kingdom that I held in trust. Do not be angry with me, dear brother! I beg you with my palms joined and my head at your feet! The councillors and the citizens felt that a kingless country would be vulnerable to conquest and so they conferred and forced me to be king!"

'And though I spoke from deep and sincere affection, that monkey was not moved. "Damn you!" he shouted

and began to berate me and say all kinds of terrible things about me in front of the citizens and the ministers whom he had called together. "You know how the *asura* Māyāvī came here one night. That cruel and wicked fool, eager for battle, challenged me to a fight" he said. "I came out of Kiṣkindha when I heard his call and this ill-intentioned brother of mine followed me quickly. When the great *asura* saw us coming after him, he ran away in fright and entered a huge hole in the earth. I saw that and told this wicked brother of mine to wait for me at the entrance because I could not return to the city without killing Māyāvī. I thought my brother would do as I asked. When I entered the cave, it took me a whole year to find the *asura*. I saw that creature who strikes terror into the hearts of his opponents and I killed him and his entire family. Blood poured out of the *asura*'s mouth when I killed him and it filled the cave. I wanted to get out but I found that the entrance was blocked. I called out to Sugrīva again and again and was very angry when there was no response. I began to kick at the blocked entrance until, finally, I got out and returned to the city. This ruthless creature forgot all about filial love and trapped me in there because of his desire for the throne!"

'Then Vālī threw me out with only the single piece of clothing that I was wearing. He threw me out and took my wife. Since then, I have wandered all over the earth with its forests and oceans, living in fear of him. Grieving for my lost wife, I came to live here on the Ṛṣyamūka mountain because the area is forbidden to Vālī for a certain reason.

'Now that I have told you everything about this terrible

enmity, you will see, Rāma, that I have been made to suffer even though I am utterly innocent. You rid the world of fear. Be gracious to me and destroy this creature that I fear so much!'

Righteous Rāma smiled. 'My arrows are sharp and as bright as the sun. They never miss their mark. They shall be sped on their way by my anger and shall fall upon the wicked Vālī!' said Rāma, his words filled with *dharma*. 'Immoral Vālī, the abductor of your wife, shall not live a single moment after I have set eyes on him! From my own experience, I know that you must be plunged in an ocean of sorrow. But I shall help you across it and you shall have what your heart desires.'

Sugrīva listened to Rāma's words which were intended to make him take heart and feel better and he honoured Rāma and praised him. 'I have no doubt you can consume the world with your flaming arrows, like the fire at the end of time!' he said. 'Listen carefully and I will describe Vālī's courage and strength and his skills. Then you can decide what you should do.

'Vālī can travel from the eastern ocean to the western and from the northern ocean to the southern before the sun has risen and not feel any fatigue. He climbs to the tops of the highest mountains and, breaking off their peaks, he tosses them into the air and catches them before they fall. Vālī breaks sap-filled trees in the forest just to prove his strength to himself.

'There was an enormous buffalo named Dundubhi, white as the peaks of Mount Kailāsa, and he had the strength of a thousand elephants. He was wicked at heart, proud of his strength and courage, and he had become

arrogant because of the boons he had received. Himāvat, the lord of the mountains, sent Dundubhi to challenge Vālī to a fight, for Vālī was invincible. Dundubhi arrived at Kiṣkindha in a rage. He had taken on the form of a terrifying buffalo with sharp horns, dark as the rain-filled clouds in the monsoon sky.

'Mighty Dundubhi roared like the rumble of war drums and it was a sound that made the earth tremble. Nearby trees split open and the buffalo dug up the earth with his hooves. In his arrogance, he gouged at the city gates with his horns, like an elephant in rut. Vālī was in the inner apartments at the time but he came out in a temper when he heard that sound, like the moon surrounded by stars.

'Vālī, lord of the monkeys and of all the forest creatures, spoke clearly and distinctly to Dundubhi. "Why are you blocking the gates of my city and roaring like this? I know that you are Dundubhi. Protect yourself, mighty one!" Dundubhi's eyes blazed with anger as he replied. "You should not speak like this in front of women, hero! Come and fight with me so that I can assess your strength! Or if you like, I shall contain my anger for the night. Indulge your pleasures until the morning, monkey!"

'Vālī dismissed Tārā and the other women and smiled slowly. "Do not assume that I am drunk!" he shouted in his rage. "Unless, of course, you are scared to fight me! Assume that I have drunk what heroes drink before they go into battle!" Vālī threw off the golden necklace that had been given to him by his father Indra and prepared himself for combat.

'He grabbed the mountainous Dundubhi by his horns and with a mighty roar, flung him to the ground. Blood

poured from Dundubhi's ears when he hit the ground and he lay there, dead. Vālī lifted that heavy and inert body in his arms and hurled it away with great force. It landed one full *yojanā* away but a few drops of blood fell from the body and were carried by the wind to the sage Matanga's hermitage. Matanga saw the enormous carcass of the buffalo lying near by and, inflamed with anger, he cursed Vālī, who had thrown it. "Whoever threw this thing can never enter this area. He will die if he does so!" Vālī begged the sage to release him from the curse but to no avail. Since then, Vālī has not set foot on the Ṛṣyamūka mountain, nor even looked at it, for fear of the sage's curse.

'And I wander through these forests with my companions, free from fear, because I know that Vālī cannot set foot here. Look, you can see Dundubhi's skeleton over there, large as a mountain. He was so proud of his strength that he brought about his own death.

'See those seven *sāla* trees over there with their thick branches? Vālī could shake the trees and make the branches fall to the ground. I am giving you examples of Vālī's strength. How will you kill him in battle, Rāma? If you can pierce even one of those *sāla* trees with a single arrow then I shall believe that you have the capacity to kill Vālī.'

Rāma playfully lifted Dundubhi's skeleton with his big toe and kicked it a distance of ten *yojanās*. Sugrīva watched and then, in front of Lakṣmaṇa, he said significantly, 'The body was covered with flesh and blood when it was kicked away before, my friend! Now, Rāma, it is all bones and is as light as straw. Under these circumstances, I cannot judge who is stronger, you or Vālī!'

Sugrīva's pointed words made Rāma lift his mighty

bow. He fitted it with a single arrow, aimed at the *sāla* trees and let it go with all his strength. The arrow resounded through the air and pierced all the seven trees as well as the mountain behind them before entering the earth. A little while later, the wondrous arrow came back and lodged itself in its quiver. The monkey was astounded and fell on the ground before Rāma, his head bowed, his ornaments dangling. Filled with delight, he honoured Rāma with his palms joined.

Thrilled with Rāma's feat, Sugrīva said to the man who knew *dharma*, who was the foremost among skilled warriors and who stood before him like a hero, 'Bull among men, you are capable of destroying all the gods in battle, even Indra, with your arrows! What then, of Vālī! Who can face you in combat when you have pierced seven trees and a mountain and the earth with a single arrow? Today my sorrows end and happiness returns, for I have the equal of Indra and Varuṇa as a friend! Gratify me by killing Vālī today, this enemy in the guise of a brother! I beg you, Rāma, with folded hands!'

Rāma embraced the happy Sugrīva and spoke words that Lakṣmaṇa also agreed with. 'Let us go to Kiṣkindha! Go ahead of us, Sugrīva, and challenge Vālī, who is your brother in name only, to a fight.'

ten

Swiftly, they all went to Kiṣkindha, Vālī's city, and stationed themselves in the forest, hiding behind trees. Sugrīva girded his loins and, outside the gates of Kiṣkindha, he let out a mighty roar that pierced the sky, challenging Vālī to fight. Vālī heard his brother and charged out in a rage, red as the sun over the western mountains. A huge and noisy fight ensued between Vālī and Sugrīva, like the clash of Mercury and Mars in the sky. In their fury, both the brothers attacked each other with their fists and feet, hitting one another with the force of thunderbolts.

His bow at the ready, Rāma watched the two monkeys fighting. They looked exactly like each other, like the *aśvins*. Rāma could not tell which was Vālī and which Sugrīva, so he held back the arrow that was bound to kill one of them. Worsted in combat, his spirit broken, Sugrīva ran back to the Ṛṣyamūka mountain because he could not see his protector, Rāma, anywhere. Vālī followed him, wounded, tired and covered with blood. But when he saw Sugrīva enter the area where he could not go because of the curse, he shouted, 'You have escaped this time!' and went back to Kiṣkindha.

Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumān returned to find

Sugrīva, his head hanging low, feeling utterly disgraced. 'Rāma, you showed me your skills and urged me to challenge Vālī. Then you let me be injured by my enemy! Why did you do this?' said Sugrīva plaintively, wretched and miserable. 'If you had made it clear before that you were not going to kill Vālī, I would never have left this place!'

'Listen to me, dear Sugrīva, and do not be angry,' said Rāma. 'Listen to why I held back my arrows. You and Vālī are exactly alike. You look like each other, your movements are the same, even your clothes and ornaments do not distinguish you from one another! Monkey, I could not even tell you apart by voice and complexion, nor by your skills, your speech or your personalities. I was thoroughly confused by these resemblances and so I did not release my deadly arrow which would have taken a life. But within the next hour, you shall see Vālī laid low by my arrow, writhing on the ground. Put on something that will distinguish you from him so that I can recognize you when you are fighting. Lakṣmaṇa, take this flowering creeper and place it around Sugrīva's neck as a garland!'

Lakṣmaṇa picked up the creeper, abundant with flowers that grew on the hillside, and arranged it around Sugrīva's neck. The monkey shone with that garland like a cloud in the evening sky. Then he made for Kiṣkindha, reassured by Rāma's words.

Once again, they all hid themselves in the trees of the forest. Sugrīva looked around the forest that he loved and worked himself up into a rage. Again he let out a great roar that seemed to pierce the sky and challenged Vālī to fight. Sugrīva blazed like the morning sun and his gait

was like a lion's. He turned to Rāma who was skilled at his task and said, 'We have arrived at Vālī's city with its golden arches and flying banners, filled with powerful monkeys. Fulfil the promise that you made earlier, as the season brings the vine to fruit, and kill Vālī!'

'You are wearing the flower garland as a sign. I shall recognize you by that!' replied Rāma. 'It makes you shine brightly like the moon with a necklace of stars in the sky! I shall release a single arrow, monkey, that will free you from the fear of your enemy Vālī! As soon as that enemy in the guise of a brother appears, I shall strike him down and he will roll in the dust. If he is still alive after I set eyes on him, Sugrīva, then the fault will be mine and you can criticize me and berate me all you want. I have never told a lie, not even in an adversity, and I never shall, for I cannot bear to violate *dharma*. Have no doubt, I shall make good my promise, as Indra ripens the crops with timely rains! Challenge Vālī, the wearer of the golden necklace! Raise the cry that will bring out that monkey who is so eager to fight!'

Golden-yellow Sugrīva let out a harsh cry that seemed to split the sky. It troubled the placid cows, who turned pale like high-born women would at the prospect of violence and anarchy. Deer fled like war horses that have been turned loose on the battlefield. Birds fell out of the sky like heavenly bodies that have exhausted their merit. Sugrīva, son of the Sun, his confidence and strength swelling like the ocean agitated by the winds, yelled with all his might, sounding like thunder from gathering clouds.

Vālī was in the women's apartments and he was terribly annoyed with his brother's yells. The sound which had

made all the creatures tremble jogged Vālī out of his intoxication and roused him to anger. His anger distorted him so much that Vālī, who was normally the colour of the evening sun, dimmed like the sun in eclipse. He rushed out of the palace, tearing up the earth with his powerful feet.

Tārā was very upset and she clung to him and spoke to him affectionately, displaying her concern for his welfare. 'Throw away this anger, hero, that has come upon you like a river in spate, as one who wakes throws away flowers from the night before! Your rushing off like this makes me uneasy. Listen and I will tell you why I want you to hold back!

'Sugrīva came here once before and challenged you to a fight. You went out in a rage and defeated him and he ran away. The fact that he comes to challenge you again after being wounded in body and spirit makes me suspicious. The arrogance and pride with which he shouts now cannot have a trivial cause. I am sure Sugrīva has come here this time with allies and help. He must have an ally who gives him the confidence to shout like this!

'Sugrīva is intelligent and cunning. He would not have come here without making sure of his ally's strength. I should also tell you what I heard earlier from prince Angada, hero! I shall repeat it now for your benefit. Your brother's ally is none other than Rāma, who is ruthless in battle and all-consuming like the doomsday fire! But he is also like the shady tree under which the virtuous can gather. He is the refuge of the oppressed and a worthy heir of fame. You should not seek enmity with him, for he is invincible and unrivalled in battle.

'Listen to me, mighty one, I have to say this to you and you must not be angry. I speak for your benefit. Take my advice. Make Sugrīva your heir apparent without any further delay. You should not have enmity with your brother, great king! Put an end to these hostilities. Earn Sugrīva's affection and make friends with Rāma! Your brother is younger than you and deserves your love and affection. Even if he is not with you now, he remains your brother wherever he is! If you believe that I have your best interests at heart and if you want to make me happy, then do as I ask!'

When Tārā with her star-bright face had finished speaking, Vālī brushed aside her advice contemptuously. 'Why should I listen quietly to my brother shouting like this, especially when he is an enemy!' he said. 'For brave men who are undefeated in battle and who never turn and flee from the battlefield, to have to listen to threats like this is worse than death! I cannot tolerate this from Sugrīva! He is eager to fight but soon his neck will be lopped off in battle!'

'Don't worry about Rāma injuring me. He knows and loves *dharma* and he is gracious. He would never do anything unethical! Why are you still following me, Tārā? Go back inside with your women. You have amply demonstrated your love and devotion to me! I must go forward and confront Sugrīva. Don't worry, I will crush his pride but I will spare his life. Promise me that you will go back inside. Wish me well and I shall return, having defeated my brother in combat!' Tārā embraced Vālī, weeping softly. She wished him well and invoked blessings upon him with the appropriate *mantras*. Then, full of

sorrow, she went back into the inner apartments with her women.

Vālī rushed out of the city, hissing like an angry serpent. Breathing heavily, he looked around for his enemy. Then he saw Sugrīva, shining yellow and golden, blazing like the fire, ready to do battle. Vālī, the mighty one, girded his loins and clenched his fists and advanced towards Sugrīva, eager to fight. Sugrīva raised his fists and came towards Vālī who was wearing his golden necklace. Vālī pounced upon Sugrīva and began to pummel him. Blood poured from Sugrīva's body like cascades from a mountain but he was undaunted. Enraged, Sugrīva uprooted an enormous *sāla* tree with all his strength and assaulted Vālī with it, like a thunderbolt striking a mountain. Stunned by the blow, Vālī reeled, as a small boat carrying merchants and their goods is rocked upon the ocean.

Those mighty monkeys, who had powerful bodies and the speed and strength of Garuḍa, fought each other like the sun and the moon in the sky. Sugrīva began to slow down, his pride crushed by Vālī, and he tried to point Vālī out to Rāma. Rāma picked an arrow that was like a poisonous snake and released it from his bow. It struck Vālī in the chest and he fell to the ground. Drenched with blood and sweat, Indra's mighty son collapsed, unconscious, on the battlefield, like an *aśoka* tree felled by the wind or Indra's toppled flagstaff.

eleven

Vālī lay sprawled on the ground with his golden ornaments like Indra's fallen banner when the ropes that hold it are severed. And when Vālī, the lord of the monkeys and the bears, lay like that on the ground, the earth's lustre was dimmed like a moonless sky. But still, Vālī's personal lustre and majesty did not leave his body, held there by the golden gem-studded necklace that had been given him by Indra. The necklace made him seem like a rain cloud tinged with the light of the setting sun.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa came over and saw that great monkey lying there with his massive arms, his chest as broad as a lion's and his yellow shining eyes. Vālī looked at Rāma and began to speak righteous words that were harsh and critical, but he spoke them gently.

'What did you gain by shooting me in the back and killing me in this fashion? I was facing away from you and was absorbed in battle with another! You are renowned in the world. All creatures say that you are noble and honourable, that your conduct is impeccable, that you are radiant and compassionate, devoted to the welfare of all beings, resolute in your vows, circumspect, and that you always do the right thing. I knew you had all these

great qualities and so, despite Tārā's advice, I confronted Sugrīva in battle.

'Because I could not see you anywhere, I assumed that you would not attack me when I was fighting Sugrīva. I did not know then that you are, in fact, wicked and unethical, though you pretend to be honourable, like a deep well that is hidden by grass. I could not see the wicked man behind the noble creature, the fire under the ashes. I have never harmed your kingdom or your city. Nor have I ever insulted you. Then why did you do me such grievous harm?

'Why did you do this to me, a harmless monkey who lives in the forest and eats roots and fruits, who had no quarrel with you but was concentrating on fighting with someone else? You are a prince, handsome and distinguished. You carry all the outward signs of *dharma*. How could someone like you, born a noble kṣatriya, who has all his ethical doubts resolved by the wise, how could you do something so cruel, hidden under the trappings of dharma?

'Truth, patience, courage, the ability to pursue conciliation, generosity and the meting out of punishment are the duties of a king, Rāma! We are but creatures of the forest. We live on roots and fruits, for that is our natural state. But you are human and you are a king. The usual reasons for conquest are land and wealth. What do I have in the forest apart from fruit that you could want so badly? Kings should not live by their whims and do as they please. But you are wilful, quick to anger, and seem to have no fixed views. You do not live by the code of kings and you seem eager to expend your arrows.

'You have killed an innocent creature like me! How will you justify this disgraceful act to good men? My skin cannot be used by men of virtue, my hair and bones are forbidden to them and my flesh cannot be eaten by those who practise *dharma*. The brahmin and the kṣatriya can eat only five five-toed animals, the rhino, the porcupine, the alligator, the rabbit and the turtle. You have killed me, a five-toed animal, whose skin and bones no virtuous man will touch and whose flesh is forbidden.

'Rāma, if the earth has you as a master, she is as vulnerable as a virtuous woman whose husband is a rake. How could you, so base, mean, deceitful and lying, be a son of Daśaratha's? If you had fought me face-to-face you would have met the god of death today! You would never have challenged me in battle and yet today I lie dying because of your deceitful arrows, like a sleeping man who has been bitten by a serpent. You killed me to make Sugrīva happy. But if you had come to me first with the same alliance, I would have brought that wicked *rākṣasa* to you in an instant! If only you had asked me, I would have recovered Sītā from the depths of the ocean or from the bottom of the earth and brought her back to you. It is right that Sugrīva should inherit the kingdom after my death, but it is not right for you to have killed me in this way!'

His face pale from the pain of his wound, Vālī, the son of Indra, fell silent, looking up at Rāma who shone like the sun. He had spoken harsh words to Rāma which seemed righteous, and were intended for his benefit. Rāma looked at the monkey who was like a dimming sun, a cloud emptied of its rain, a dying fire, and said things that

really were filled with *dharma* and were intended to educate the monkey king.

'Your criticisms of me are childish and immature for you have not truly understood the meaning of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* or worldly living. You have never been exposed to the teachings or the wisdom of learned men and yet, you, with your monkey nature, presume to teach me!

'This earth with its mountains and forests belongs to the Ikṣvākus. They have the right to praise or condemn all the birds, beasts and men who inhabit it! It is ruled by the righteous and honourable Bharata. He is learned in the principles of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* and he is devoted to justice. We and other kings execute his orders which are rooted in *dharma*, here and all over the earth so that the eternal *dharma* may flourish. When the earth is ruled by the righteous and honourable Bharata it is not possible for anyone anywhere to violate *dharma* and not be punished for it.

'You have transgressed the bounds of *dharma*. Your conduct is inappropriate because you are ruled entirely by pleasure. You are not fit to be a king! The elder brother and the teacher who imparts knowledge are all regarded as equal to a father by the man who pursues the path of righteousness. A younger brother and a virtuous student are regarded as equal to a son, according to the dictates of *dharma*.

'Monkey, the *dharma* followed by truly good men is subtle and hard to understand. How can a fickle creature like you, who learns from other equally fickle monkeys, know anything? Blind men learn nothing from confronting

each other! Let me explain things to you. Control yourself and listen to me!

'Here is the first reason for my killing you. You have rejected the eternal *dharma* and slept with your brother's wife. You lust for Rūmā and sleep with her even though Sugrīva is still alive. This is unacceptable because you should treat her as a daughter-in-law. I killed you for sleeping with your brother's wife and because you were motivated by lust! There can be no other punishment for this violation of *dharma* and of the worldly code. The man who sleeps with his sister, his daughter or his brother's wife is punished by death according to the traditional texts.

'My friendship with Sugrīva is equal to my love for Lakṣmaṇa. Our pact is that I will restore to him his wife and his kingdom and in return for that, he will devote himself to my interests. I gave him my word on this in front of the other monkeys. How could I then not fulfil my promise? It is the duty of a righteous man to help his friend. All the reasons I have given you are rooted in *dharma*. You have to agree that you have been justly punished! Stop your laments! You were killed because *dharma* demanded it. We cannot act as we please!

'Traps and ropes and snares of all kinds are used to capture animals. Animals are caught and killed when they are running away, or when they are agitated, even when they have no idea of the danger they are in. Men kill animals for their flesh even when their faces are turned away. There is nothing wrong with that! Royal sages, learned in *dharma*, go hunting. I killed you with an arrow, monkey. Whether you were in a position to fight back or not is irrelevant, for you are nothing but an animal!

'*Dharma* is certainly hard to understand. Kings are the source of it, as they are the source of all good things. One should not harm kings, or attack them or criticize them or displease them, for they are gods on earth in the form of men. You are ignorant of these things and that is why you condemn me for following a code that has come down from the time of my forefathers!'

Vālī began to regret his outburst. 'What you have said is absolutely true,' he said with his palms joined. 'An inferior cannot refute what his superior says. I was careless and wrong when I spoke to you so harshly before. But do not hold it against me, Rāma! You know all there is to know about the goals of life and you are devoted to the well-being of your subjects. You have a clear understanding of cause and effect. I failed in my duties and I violated *dharma*!'

Vālī's eyes filled with tears and he continued, slowly and sincerely, looking at Rāma like an elephant caught in quicksand. 'I have no sorrow for Tārā or any of my other relations, only for my virtuous son, my golden boy, Angada. I have loved him and cared for him since he was a child. He will be miserable without me. Treat Angada and Sugrīva as you would Bharata and Lakṣmaṇa. Correct them when they do wrong and support them when they are right. Make sure that Sugrīva is not harsh with virtuous Tārā. She has done nothing wrong, unless my mistakes are judged to be hers as well.'

Seeing that Vālī was now thinking righteously, Rāma reassured him. 'Do not worry about these things or about the future of your soul, king of the monkeys! I acted on the basis of *dharma*. The wrongdoer who suffers

punishment and the one who metes out the punishment have both done their duty and the score has been settled!'

'I was critical of you because the pain from this arrow had clouded my mind!' said Vālī. 'You are Indra's equal! Be gracious to me!'

Meanwhile, Tārā had heard that her husband had been fatally wounded by Rāma in battle. She ran out of her mountain cave with her son, greatly agitated. She saw Angada's mighty retainers fleeing in terror, as fast as if they had been seated on Rāma's arrows, for they had seen Rāma armed with his bow. Tārā stopped and asked the terrified monkeys, 'How can you run like this in fear when you are supposed to be in the vanguard of the forces? How can you run when Vālī is lying there bloodied, killed by Rāma at the insistence of Sugrīva who only wants the kingdom?'

Those monkeys who could change their forms at will had understood the situation well. 'Death has arrived in the form of Rāma and claimed Vālī!' they said to beautiful Tārā. 'Your son is still alive. Turn back and watch over him, lovely lady! When Vālī, who was Indra's equal, was killed, all the monkeys fled in different directions. Protect the city gates and place your son on the throne immediately. The monkeys will rally round Vālī's son if he takes his place!'

Tārā, the one with the lovely smile, cut them short. 'What do I care for the kingdom or my son or myself,' she retorted, 'when my husband, that auspicious lion among monkeys, lies dead! I am going to throw myself at his feet!' and she ran from there weeping, beating her head and breast.

She arrived at the spot where her husband lay, the monkey who had killed *dānavas*, who never fled from battle, who hurled mountains on the battlefield as Indra hurled thunderbolts, whose battle cry was like the rumbling of thunder. She saw Rāma leaning on his bow and she saw Lakṣmaṇa and her husband's younger brother. She ran past them all to where her husband lay on the battlefield and when she saw him, she swooned in grief and fell to the ground. Recovering consciousness, she rose like one who wakes from a deep sleep and seeing Vālī bound by death's noose, she wailed, 'Oh my noble husband!' Sugrīva saw her weeping and noticed that Angada had also arrived and he felt a consuming sadness.

Tārā, with her star-bright face, embraced her husband's body. 'Oh great hero, so ruthless in battle, why do you not speak to me? I stand here before you, utterly wretched! Stand up, tiger among monkeys, and come back to your soft bed. The ground is not an appropriate place for a king like you! Ah! My heart must be hard indeed that it does not shatter into a thousand pieces when I see you dead on the ground! You exiled Sugrīva and took his wife. Now you are paying the price for that!

'But Rāma, who did this terrible thing, killing Vālī while he was fighting another, feels no remorse! And I, who have never known any sorrow, shall burn in the fires of my grief as a widow with no one to protect me. What about my son Angada? He has been raised in the lap of luxury and has known only happiness! How will he live with an uncle who is a slave to anger?

'My son, take a good look at your father, who loved *dharma*, for you shall not see him again. Reassure your

son and give him some final advice. Kiss him on the forehead, for you have embarked on your final journey! Rāma did a great thing by killing you and paying off his debt to Sugrīva. You have got what you wanted, Sugrīva, you have Rūmā back. Enjoy your kingship, for your brother who was your enemy is now dead! Why do you not speak to me even as I babble on with love as I weep? Look at all your lovely wives, king of the monkeys!'

Seeing Tārā's distress, all the other female monkeys clung to Angada and began to wail.

Vālī was now breathing with difficulty and his life was ebbing fast. He looked around him and saw Sugrīva standing in front of Angada. 'Sugrīva, do not hold a grudge against me for what I have done!' he said affectionately to the victorious king of the monkeys. 'I did it because my mind was confounded by fate and there is no resisting that! I can only think that we were not destined to enjoy kingship and brotherly love at the same time! Today, you shall take over as the king of the monkeys and I shall go to the abode of death.

'Look at Angada, lying on the ground and weeping! He is still a boy but he is no fool! He has grown up without any hardships and he deserves all happiness. He is dearer to me than life, this son of mine. Look after him as your own and protect his interests at all times. Be his protector and benefactor in times of trouble, as I have been. Tārā's son is equal to you in strength and courage and he will be in the forefront of the battle with the *rākṣasas*. He is young but his performance in battle will be worthy of him in every way.

'Tārā, the daughter of Suṣeṇa, is intelligent and

understands the subtleties and nuances of every situation. She can see danger and prepares for it. You should follow her advice without hesitation. Her judgement is flawless and she is never wrong. Do Rāma's work without thinking twice. To not do so would be unrighteous. But do not slight him for he will punish you! Take this celestial golden necklace, Sugrīva. I will not need its glory when I am dead!'

Sugrīva's elation vanished before Vālī's affection like a moon under an eclipse, and he began to feel wretched and sad. His resentment disappeared and eager to follow Vālī's instructions, he stepped forward to receive the necklace. Vālī was ready to give up his life, but then his eye fell on his son.

'Receive the good and the bad with equanimity,' he said lovingly. 'Learn to understand what is appropriate for time and place and always listen to Sugrīva. Do not ally yourself with his enemies or those that oppose him. Be restrained. Devote yourself to your king and obey his orders at all times!'

Vālī's eyes rolled upwards, and baring his teeth in a grimace of pain, he fell back, dead. His subjects were distracted and confused like cows in a forest frequented by lions, when the leader of the herd dies. Tārā was plunged into an ocean of grief as she gazed at her husband's lifeless face. She threw herself on the ground beside Vālī like a creeper entwined around a tree that has been cut down.

'You would not listen to me and now you lie here on this hard, bare ground, covered with stones!' wept Tārā as she kissed Vālī's dead face. 'The earth must be dearer to you than I am for you lie here in her embrace and you do not even speak to me! You lie on a hero's bed on this

battlefield, where you yourself killed so many enemies in the past!

'Ah! My hero, so eager to fight! Your blood lines were pure and noble! You looked after me so well, and now you have left me unprotected! No thinking man should ever marry his daughter to a valiant warrior. Look at me, widowed and destroyed in an instant! A woman without a husband is considered vulnerable, no matter how many children she has, or how much wealth or how much grain!

'You lie in a pool of your own blood, as you used to lie in your bed with its blood-red quilt! Your body is covered with dust and blood but I cannot hold it in my arms. Sugrīva gained his objectives with a single arrow. Rāma liberated him from this deadly enmity as well as from the fear that shadowed him. I can only look at your dead face. I cannot even hold you because of the arrow that sticks out of your heart!'

Nīla pulled the arrow out of Vālī's body and it emerged like a poisonous snake that had hidden in a rocky crevice. It shone like the sun as it sets behind the mountains and blood poured forth from Vālī's many wounds like mountain waterfalls carrying coppery ore. Tārā wiped the dust from the battlefield off her husband's body and bathed him with her tears.

'Excess grief is of no help to the dead,' said Rāma practically to Sugrīva when he noticed that all life had left Vālī's body. 'You must now get on with the task at hand. You have shed enough tears, now do what is required for worldly life. Everything has its proper time and place.'

Lakṣmaṇa organized Vālī's cremation and helped Sugrīva perform the last rites for the king of the monkeys.

Then Hanumān, the son of the Wind, his face shining like the rising sun, joined his palms and said to Rāma, 'Thanks to you, Sugrīva has gained the lordship of the monkeys, which is hard to obtain and which has come down from his forefathers. With your permission, he would like to enter the city and begin the tasks of administration in consultation with his supporters. Come with us to our beautiful city set in a hollow of the hills! Accept our loyalty and make us all happy!'

'Hanumān, by the orders of my father, I am pledged not to enter a city or a village for fourteen years. But let Sugrīva enter his city and be crowned king of the monkeys without any further delay,' said Rāma. Then he turned to Sugrīva. 'Anoint Angada your heir!

'This is the first month of the rainy season which will last for four months. The rains are heavy and this is not the right time for us to start on our expedition. Go into your city and Lakṣmaṇa and I will live here on this mountain. The cave is large and pleasant and the area abounds in water and lotus ponds. We shall start on our journey to kill Rāvaṇa in the month of Kārtik. Now that we have agreed on this, go back and crown yourself among your friends and well-wishers and give them cause to celebrate.'

Sugrīva returned to the city of Kiṣkindha which had been under Vālī's protection and thousands of monkeys surrounded him and greeted him joyfully. All kinds of monkeys, from the common and ordinary to the noble and high-born, bowed low and prostrated themselves at his feet. Valiant Sugrīva spoke to them all kindly and raised them up from the ground and then he entered his brother's

beautiful palace. When he emerged, his friends and supporters crowned him the way Indra had been crowned by the gods.

twelve

Meanwhile, Rāma went with Lakṣmaṇa to Mount Prasravaṇa which was full of deer and tigers and fierce, roaring lions. It was heavily wooded and thick creepers covered the trees and bushes. Bears, different kinds of monkeys and wild cats also lived on this mountain where fresh, clear water was plentiful, and which was as huge as a bank of clouds.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa settled in a long, wide cave at the top of the mountain. But though they lived on such a pleasant and bounteous mountain, Rāma was not happy. He thought constantly about his abducted wife who was dearer to him than life. He would lie down every night, but the beauty of his surroundings made it impossible for him to sleep. Never really free from sadness, Rāma would find his eyes brimming with tears at times like this. But his brother, who was equally unhappy, would plead with him.

'You must stop grieving like this! It does not become you. You know all is lost when you succumb to grief! You believe in destiny, in the value of human effort, and you also believe in the gods. You are righteous and enterprising. You cannot overcome your enemy if you do not pull yourself together. Especially since he is a *rākṣasa* who uses

unfair tactics in battle. Pull out your sorrow from its roots and then you will be able to destroy the roots and the branches of the *rākṣasa's* tree with a sincere effort! You can turn the world with its forests and oceans and mountains upside down! What of Rāvaṇa? I am only trying to rouse the valour that sleeps inside you with my words, like a fire is raised from smouldering ashes when oblations are added at the right time!'

Rāma considered Lakṣmaṇa's sound advice which was intended for his benefit. 'Ah, Lakṣmaṇa! You have spoken sweetly to me, brave words that are imbued with love and intended for my welfare,' he said affectionately. 'I shall cast off my grief and revive the spirit that makes me triumph against all odds. We are in the middle of the rains now so I shall wait for the autumn. Then I shall destroy the *rākṣasa* along with his forces and his kingdom!'

One day, Rāma said, 'The rainy season has begun. Look at the sky covered with mountainous clouds! It is as if the sky drank the ocean's essence through the rays of the sun and after holding it in her womb for nine months, now puts it forth! You feel as if you could climb to the sky on this ladder of clouds and place a garland of flowers around the sun. The sky is like a pining lover, the gentle breeze his sighs, the evening clouds the sandalpaste upon his chest, the white clouds the pallor of his face.

'The earth parched by the summer heat and now flooded with water reminds me of Sītā shedding tears after being scorched by her grief. The mountain covered with flowers is drenched by the rains as Sugrīva was drenched in auspicious liquids when he was anointed king. The sky, struck with lightning's golden whip, cries out in pain in a

rumble of thunder. And the lightning flashing across the dark clouds makes me think of Sītā writhing in Rāvaṇa's dark arms!

'Look at the flowers on the hillside, Lakṣmaṇa! They rejoice in the fresh rainwater and make me think of love, even though I am so depressed. The dust has settled, the breezes have cooled and the discomforts of summer have passed. Kings have stopped their expeditions and all the travellers have returned home. Streams flow swift and sure, tinted red with the ores in the mountain soils. They carry flowers with them and peacocks call from their banks.

'Clouds as big as mountains, which have lightning as their banners and flocks of cranes as their garlands, rumble like rutting elephants on a battlefield. Cranes are drawn to the clouds by desire and fly around them in formation, like a garland of white lotuses that streams in the wind across the sky. Sleep comes as slowly as a river moving to the ocean, but the crane rushes to the cloud and the woman runs to her lover.

'Elephants enjoy themselves inhaling the fresh fragrance of flowers. Excited by the sounds of waterfalls, they trumpet in time with the peacocks' calls. An elephant walks along familiar paths in the hills and hearing the rumble of distant thunder he thinks it is a rival elephant trumpeting and turns back, eager to fight. Birds of many colours, anxious to quench their parched throats, drink the drops of water that hang like crystals on the leaves and have been sent to them by the lord of the forests.

'This is the month in which the brahmins of the Sāma Veda begin their studies in the correct modes of chanting. Bharata, king of Kosalā, must have finished with his

administrative activities and should be starting on the vows and rituals for the month of Āṣādha. The river Sarayū must be swelling with water the way the noise will swell when I return to Ayodhyā.

'Sugrīva has defeated his enemy and regained his kingdom and his wife. He must be enjoying these torrential rains. But I have lost my wife and my kingdom, Lakṣmaṇa, and I suffer like the banks of a river which are being slowly eroded. My grief is boundless, the rains seem endless and Rāvaṇa is a deadly enemy! How will I ever overcome all this, Lakṣmaṇa?

'I did not suggest that we start on our enterprise, even though Sugrīva would have been amenable, because I knew that the roads would be impassable and that travelling would be dangerous. Besides that, Sugrīva has suffered and been separated from his women for a long time. My mission is very important, but I did not want to start on it then. When he has rested and recovered, I am sure Sugrīva himself will remember that the time has come to start. I have no doubt that he will remember his debt to me.

'So I wait for that time, the time when Sugrīva and the rivers will be gracious to me! A good man always returns the favour done to him!'

'The king of the monkeys will soon do as he promised,' said Lakṣmaṇa. 'Wait patiently for the rains to end and autumn to begin. Stay firm in your resolve to destroy the enemy!'

After four months, the sky was clear of clouds and lightning. It was filled, instead, with the sounds of cranes and was bathed in a gentle moonlight. Sugrīva had achieved his ends and seemed disinclined towards the path of

righteousness. He was obsessed with the gratification of his senses. He turned away from all his official duties and spent his time indulging all his pleasures. Not only had his own wife been restored to him, he now had Tārā as well and he had always desired her. He spent all day and all night enjoying himself with them, with not a care in the world. Sugrīva played all day like the gods with the *apsarases* in Nandana. He had handed over all the affairs of the state to his ministers and did not even bother to supervise them.

Hanumān knew what was appropriate for time and place, he knew *dharma* and he understood the need of the hour. He approached Sugrīva with sweet words and gentle talk to put him in a good mood. Then he spoke to him about his duties, about conciliation and the return of favours.

'You have regained your kingdom and with that you have acquired fame and fortune. Gaining friendships is all that is left and you should attend to that now. He who stands by his friends at the appropriate time augments his own fame, his kingdom and his strength. You have always held to the traditional code of conduct. You should see to the fulfilment of your friend's goals as you had promised. He who fails to help his friend at the right time will never gain his specific goal, however hard he tries and whatever else he gains.

'Let us start on Rāma's venture and begin the search for Sītā. It is long overdue! Rāma knows the appropriate time for action and he knows that the moment for beginning the search is passing. But he will not remind you of this because he expects you to remember it yourself.

Mighty Rāma is your well-wisher and he supports your entire clan. His skills and strength are immeasurable and his virtues unrivalled. He did what you wanted. Now you should do what he wants. Get the best of the monkeys started on his task.

'King of the monkeys, you help even those who do nothing for you. You must help the one who has helped you regain your kingdom and your wealth. You are strong and powerful and can do what will please Rāma. Why do you delay? Rāma can subdue the gods, the *asuras* and the *uragas* with his arrows, but he looks to you and your promise to help him with his task. He helped you at the risk of his life. Let us begin searching the earth and the heavens for Sītā. Not the gods nor the *gandharvas*, the *asuras*, *yakṣas* or the troops of *māruts* hold any fear for Rāma, what then is a mere *rākṣasa*? King of the monkeys, we would go anywhere, to the forests, waters or the sky, at your command! There are hundreds of thousands of monkeys, strong and powerful, who will do anything you ask!'

Now that he had been reminded of his duty at the appropriate time, the virtuous Sugrīva made a decision. He summoned Nīla and instructed him to call in all the monkeys from all directions. 'Tell the army commanders and their forces to assemble here immediately. Call in even the swift and brave monkeys who guard the borders of the kingdom. See to it personally that my orders are carried out. Any monkey who is not here within fifteen days shall be punished with death, let there be no doubt about this!' Once he had given these instructions, Sugrīva retired to the inner apartments again.

Meanwhile, Rāma had lived through the rainy season and was now tormented with grief. He gazed in anguish at the clear sky and the white orb of the moon. On those autumn nights bathed in moonlight, he thought about Sugrīva who had attained his ends and about Sītā's absence. He saw that the time he and Sugrīva had agreed upon had passed. But he controlled his anger and, sitting on top of that mountain streaked with metallic ores, his thoughts turned to Sītā.

'Ah! My beloved! Her voice was as sweet as a bird's! How can she rejoice in birdsong now as she used to in our forest hut? How can she enjoy these golden flowering bushes like she used to when I was by her side? How must she feel now when she hears birds calling to their mates? I feel no joy in wandering through the woods with their streams and pools without doe-eyed Sītā by my side!' cried Rāma, lord of all men, lamenting like the *cātaka* bird begging the gods for water.

Lakṣmaṇa came home from a pleasant walk on the hillside to collect fruit and found Rāma in this state. Seeing that his brother was consumed by grief and was sitting despondent in a lonely place, valiant Lakṣmaṇa said, 'Why have you succumbed to the pain of separation and longing and allowed your manly spirit to be sapped? You must be firm and resolute and not fritter away your energies. If you are going to achieve your purpose, you must be active, you must concentrate your mind. Display your courage and utilize the strengths of your allies. Sītā cannot be so easily snatched away when she has you as a protector. How can one touch a flame and not be burned?'

Rāma listened carefully to Lakṣmaṇa's sympathetic

words that were just, filled with *dharma* and intended for his benefit. 'Certainly, we must get on with our mission in such a way that we ensure its success,' he said. 'But should we also not think about the reward that awaits us at the end?' And Rāma's thoughts turned back to the lotus-eyed Sītā. Scorched by grief, he continued, 'The god of the rains has gratified the earth with water and now that his task is done, he is at rest. The clouds have shed their load of water with pleasant rumblings and, exhausted, they sail lightly over the mountain tops. The storm winds which were filled with rain and, laden with the scent of flowers, pushed the clouds along, have died down, their task complete.

'All of a sudden, thunder clouds, waterfalls, elephants and peacocks have fallen silent. Mountain peaks have been washed clean by the great clouds and now they seem painted in bright colours and shine like rays of moonlight. The autumn streams slowly reveal their sandbanks like a modest woman revealing her breasts during her first experience of love.

'This is the time, Lakṣmaṇa, when kings set out on expeditions against their enemies and those they want to conquer. This is the time when journeys begin. But I see no sign of Sugrīva or of our expedition! The four months of the rainy season have gone by but for me, tormented by grief, they have seemed like a hundred years! I live here, deprived of my wife and kingdom, but Sugrīva has no sympathy for me, Lakṣmaṇa! "Without his kingdom, with no protection, harassed by Rāvaṇa, pathetic, lovelorn and far from home, he has come to me for refuge!" That is what the wicked king of the monkeys thinks of me. He

regards me with contempt.

'Sugrīva knows the time has come to begin the search for Sītā. But now that he has what he wants, he behaves irresponsibly! Go to Kiṣkindha and find that idiot king of the monkeys! Give him this message from me—"The lowest of all creatures is he who raises the hopes of those who come to him for help, those who have helped in the past and who are quite capable of enforcing what is due to them! The best of men stick to their word, whether it is given rightly or wrongly. Obviously, you want to see me draw my bow, decorated with gold, that flashes like lightning on the battlefield! You wish to hear again the thunderous resonance of my bowstring as I draw it back in anger!"

'It is quite amazing that even though Sugrīva knows my skills and my power and knows that I have you by my side, he still does not seem to care. Absorbed in his pleasures, the king of the monkeys does not seem to have noticed that the season of the rains is over. Drunk all the time, he enjoys himself with his ministers and spares not a single thought for us here, tormented and miserable.

'Go to Sugrīva and tell him how angry I am! Tell him, also, "The road that Vālī took is not yet closed! Stick to your commitment, Sugrīva, and do not follow Vālī down that path! I killed Vālī with a single arrow. I can also kill you and your entire family!" You know what is appropriate, Lakṣmaṇa! Tell him whatever else you like after you have assessed the situation, keeping in mind that the moment is passing!'

thirteen

Lakṣmaṇa understood that his brother was depressed and miserable as well as angry. 'The king of the monkeys is unrighteous! He does not realize that today he is reaping the fruits of his past actions. He will not enjoy this royal splendour for much longer and so he chooses to ignore our task. Like a fool, he immerses himself in pleasure and does not think about repaying your kindness. Such immoral creatures should not be given kingdoms! I cannot control my anger! I shall kill him and he can join his brother Vālī! Vālī's son can go out with the best of monkeys and recover Sītā!' said Lakṣmaṇa and he leapt up and grabbed his bow.

'The best of men is the one who can control his anger,' said Rāma calmly, choosing his words carefully. 'Behaving like this is not worthy of you. Act in the spirit of our alliance. Do not be harsh. Speak sweetly and only remind Sugrīva that the time for beginning our enterprise is slipping away.'

Lakṣmaṇa took his brother's words to heart and entered the city. Wise Lakṣmaṇa, devoted to his brother's well-wisher, being, controlled his anger and went towards the monkey's palace. Tall as Mount Mahendra and looking

like death, Lakṣmaṇa carried his mighty bow that rivalled Indra's and gleamed like a mountain peak. As he walked along, he rehearsed in his mind what he would say to Sugrīva, what Sugrīva's answer might be and what he would say in return.

Filled with the fire of his brother's anger, Lakṣmaṇa was not in a good mood as he strode towards the city like an approaching hurricane. His lips trembled with rage and soon, he saw immense monkeys outside Kiṣkindha. The monkeys noticed Lakṣmaṇa coming towards them and at once, those monkeys who were the size of elephants, armed themselves with boulders and trees. Lakṣmaṇa's fury doubled, like a fire replenished with fuel, when the monkeys armed themselves. The monkeys saw that he was incensed, that he blazed like the doomsday fire, so they fled in their hundreds in all directions.

They ran to Sugrīva's palace and told him about the arrival of the enraged Lakṣmaṇa. But Sugrīva, totally absorbed in making love to Tārā, did not hear them. His ministers ordered a band of monkeys, as dark and immense as mountains, to go forth from the city to confront Lakṣmaṇa. Fierce and cruel-looking, the monkeys had the valour of lions and they used their teeth and nails as weapons. But Lakṣmaṇa grew angrier still when he saw the monkeys guarding Kiṣkindha and when he thought of his brother's frustrations and Sugrīva's addiction to pleasure.

Angada approached Lakṣmaṇa with some trepidation. 'Tell Sugrīva that I have come, my child,' roared Lakṣmaṇa, his eyes blazing. 'Tell Sugrīva, "Rāma's younger brother Lakṣmaṇa stands at your door, burning with grief at his

brother's suffering. Lakṣmaṇa, the subduer of his foes, has come to see you!"' Angada ran to tell his uncle that Lakṣmaṇa had arrived.

Meanwhile, the monkeys watched Lakṣmaṇa bearing down upon them like an angry flood. They raised a hue and cry in their terror which sounded like the rumbling of thunder. Their noise woke Sugrīva and he rose, his eyes red and rolling back in his head with drunkenness, his garlands dishevelled, his ornaments awry. Two of his ministers, who had heard Angada's news, came with him, for they were intimate with Sugrīva and were allowed into the presence of his women.

Plakṣa and Prabhava, Sugrīva's advisors on *artha* and *dharma*, told him about Lakṣmaṇa. 'Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are righteous and honourable and they made an alliance with you. They are worthy of kingship themselves and they gave you a kingdom. One of them, Lakṣmaṇa, stands at your door, armed with his bow. The monkeys tremble and weep for fear of him. He has come here at Rāma's command. Go with your son and your family and prostrate yourself at his feet. Calm his anger. Honour your promise and fulfil your commitment, O king!'

Eloquent Sugrīva rose from his seat and presented the proposition to be considered before his wise and experienced ministers.

'I have neither said nor done anything wrong. Why is Lakṣmaṇa so angry? My enemies are always looking to harm me and they must have carried tales of my imagined lapses to Lakṣmaṇa! Use all your wisdom and experience to try and understand what his behaviour indicates. I have nothing to fear from Rāma or Lakṣmaṇa, but when a friend

is angry for no apparent reason, one tends to get confused and bewildered. Making friends at any time is easy, but maintaining a friendship is difficult. The heart is so fickle that even a trivial thing can ruin a friendship. That is what worries me, for I can never hope to repay Rāma for all that he has done for me!'

After deliberating privately, Hanumān offered his conclusions in front of all the ministers. 'No one is surprised that you recall Rāma's affectionate favour to you, king of the monkeys! Heroic Rāma set aside all fear and killed Vālī, who was Indra's equal, in order to make you happy. I am sure Rāma has sent his brother here in anger because of your agreement.

'Though you are the foremost among those who know the right time to act, you have been otherwise engaged and seem not to have noticed that autumn has come. The time to begin our mission has arrived. It is clear that you have been rather careless. That is why Lakṣmaṇa has come here. Do not resent the harshness of Rāma's message. He is in terrible pain because of the separation from his wife. You have made a mistake and I see no course of action other than appeasing Lakṣmaṇa with joined palms.

'Ministers are appointed to give kings advice that will benefit them. So I have given you my opinion without fear of reprisal. Go to Lakṣmaṇa with your son and your family and bow your head before him. Honour your promise and fulfil your commitment, O king!'

Following Rāma's orders, Lakṣmaṇa, the destroyer of enemy heroes, entered the huge city of Kiṣkindha that was built into the side of a mountain. The enormous monkeys standing at the gates bowed to him respectfully, but when

they saw that he was angry and breathing heavily, they were apprehensive and stayed away from him.

Lakṣmaṇa looked around the city nestling in the valley with its jewel-studded buildings and flower-filled gardens. Full of elegant mansions and shops, Kiṣkindha overflowed with trees which flowered and fruited all through the year. The monkey citizens were the children of gods and *gandharvas* and they could change their forms at will. They were beautiful to behold in their fine clothes and celestial garlands. Kiṣkindha's roads were perfumed with flowers and sandal-paste and the fragrance of natural liquors like mead and toddy wafted through the air. Lakṣmaṇa saw the homes of the great monkey chiefs and the wide thoroughfares that gleamed like white clouds. They were decorated with celestial flowers, filled with wealth and grain and adorned by women who shone like jewels.

The king's palace rivalled Indra's. It was surrounded by sparkling white walls which were hard to breach. It had several white towers like the peaks of Mount Kailāsa. Its garden had trees gifted by Indra that gave any kind of fruit that you could wish for. They were covered with flowers and provided generous, soothing shade.

Mighty Lakṣmaṇa entered Sugrīva's palace uninvited, as the sun enters a huge cloud. He passed through seven courtyards before he came to the heavily guarded inner apartments which were filled with couches of gold and silver and seats covered with rich and beautiful brocades. Lakṣmaṇa could hear soft and melodious music as he walked in and he saw scores of women, all of them revelling in their youth and beauty. They sat there, adorned with rare flowers and exquisite jewels, weaving garlands.

Lakṣmaṇa could not see a single retainer who was lazy, discontented or not fully adorned.

Finally, he saw Sugrīva sitting on a golden couch covered by a priceless brocade, shining like the sun. Around him sat beautiful women adorned with flowers and jewels. In his fine clothes and celestial jewels and garlands of flowers, Sugrīva appeared like Indra himself as he sat with Rūmā in his arms. The golden monkey stared at indomitable Lakṣmaṇa with his large eyes.

Sugrīva was terribly agitated when he realized that Lakṣmaṇa had entered the palace unhindered. He saw that Lakṣmaṇa was breathing heavily and was blazing with splendour, that he was clearly angry about his brother's suffering. Sugrīva leapt up from his seat and his women rose with him, making him seem like the moon surrounded by stars in the sky. He stood trembling before Lakṣmaṇa, his eyes red and his palms joined.

'A king gains renown in the world by being honourable, truthful, noble, self-controlled, compassionate and grateful to those who have helped him,' said Lakṣmaṇa angrily. 'There is no one more cruel and heartless than an unrighteous king who makes false promises to those who have helped him. He who does not fulfil his commitments after making use of his friends deserves to be killed by all creatures!

'You are a base and ungrateful liar, monkey! You made use of Rāma's skills and you have not repaid him! If you have any memory of what Rāma did for you, you should now be making efforts to find Sītā! You have indulged in all these vulgar pleasures and you have broken your promise. Rāma did not recognize you for what you are, a

snake imitating a frog! Moved by pity, the great-souled Rāma secured the monkey kingdom for you, you wretched creature! If you can't remember what blameless Rāma did, then, slain by these arrows, you shall soon meet Vālī! The road that Vālī took is not yet closed. Keep your promise, Sugrīva, and do not go the way of Vālī! You have obviously not seen the arrows which fly like thunderbolts from the bows of the Ikṣvāku heroes! That is why you indulge yourself and pay no attention to Rāma's affairs!'

'You should not say such things, Lakṣmaṇa,' cautioned Tārā with her star-bright face. 'The king of the monkeys does not deserve these harsh words, especially from you! Sugrīva is not deceitful. Nor is he cruel or ungrateful. He is neither dishonest nor a liar. He has not forgotten what Rāma did for him, which was something others would have found hard to accomplish on the battlefield.

'It is thanks to Rāma that Sugrīva regained the ancient kingdom of the monkeys as well as Rūmā and me! Sugrīva has found himself amidst these pleasures after so many nights of deprivation and he has lost track of time, just as the sage Viśvāmitra did! When Viśvāmitra was infatuated with Ghṛtāci, didn't he find that ten years had passed like a single day? If even a sage like Viśvāmitra, who understands and knows everything about time, could lose track of its passing, what then of ordinary creatures like us? Rāma should forgive this obsession with sensual pleasures in someone who has been deprived for so long and who, despite these gratifications, is still not satisfied.

'And you, my child, should not get angry like this, like a common man, without really knowing Sugrīva's intentions. Resolute men like you should not succumb to

such bursts of passion! You know *dharma*. I plead with you on Sugrīva's behalf not to hold on to your indignation. Calm yourself. I know Sugrīva would give up everything, the kingdom, Rūmā and me, just to make Rāma happy!

'Sugrīva will kill Rāvaṇa in battle and restore Sītā to Rāma. You know that there are thousands of *rākṣasas* in Lankā. Without killing those fearsome creatures who can change form at will, you cannot hope to kill Rāvaṇa. They cannot be killed without allies, Lakṣmaṇa. Especially Rāvaṇa, he cannot be killed without assistance.

'Mighty monkeys have already been despatched to summon hundreds of monkey chiefs to fight in this war for your sake, Lakṣmaṇa. Sugrīva has not set forth himself because he is waiting for the arrival of these powerful and magnificent monkeys who will support Rāma's cause. Sugrīva sent out these instructions long before you came and the monkeys should arrive here today. Get rid of your anger, subduer of enemies. Hundreds of thousands of monkeys and bears will join you today!'

Lakṣmaṇa was gentle by nature and he accepted Tārā's conciliatory words. When Sugrīva saw that he had been placated, he cast off his fear of Lakṣmaṇa as one would cast off wet clothes. He tore off his garland made of rare and beautiful flowers and ripped it apart as he shrugged off his intoxication.

'Lakṣmaṇa, it was thanks to Rāma that I regained the ancient kingdom of the monkeys and this royal splendour,' said Sugrīva humbly, his palms joined. 'How can I ever hope to repay that god-like man for the great deed he performed? Rāma will kill Rāvaṇa and get Sītā back with his own powers, I shall only be a helper! How can anyone

help the man who can pierce seven *sāla* trees with a single arrow? If I have transgressed the bounds of our friendship by presuming too much, then you must forgive me. Who is there that has never offended a friend?'

'My brother has all the support he needs with you as an ally, especially since you are so affectionate!' said Lakṣmaṇa, pleased with Sugrīva's words. 'You deserve the kingdom and all its pleasures, Sugrīva, because of your pure heart and your openness. I have no doubt that with your help, Rāma will soon slay all his foes in battle!

'What you have just said, Sugrīva, shows that you know *dharma*, that you are grateful and that you are not likely to turn and flee in battle. Where would my brother and I find another like you, best of monkeys, one who admits to a fault even when he has the capacity to cover it up? You are Rāma's equal in strength and courage and you were sent by the gods to be his ally!

'But come quickly with me now, and console your friend who grieves so desperately for his lost wife! You must pardon the harsh words that I spoke after hearing Rāma's lamentations!'

fourteen

Sugrīva turned to Hanumān who stood at his side and said, 'Summon all the monkeys who live in all corners of the world by donations, conciliation and diplomacy! I know we have already sent messengers to them, but send more monkeys out after them to hurry them up. Bring all the monkeys here at once, even the ones engaged in making love and those that are inclined to be slow. If they are not here within ten days, they shall be killed for disobeying their king!

'There are thousands of millions of monkeys under my command. Let them all be brought into my presence. Send out the immense monkeys that are the size of clouds and who blot out the sky to make my commands known to all! Send out the monkeys who know where all the other monkeys live on the earth!'

Hanumān did as he was instructed and sent the powerful monkeys out in all directions. Wherever they found other monkeys, in the forests, in the mountains, in the seas and lakes, they urged them to come forward and help Rāma. And the monkeys came because they feared Sugrīva who was their king of kings and who was as formidable as Death.

Three hundred million monkeys, black as kohl, came

from the Añjanā mountain, one hundred million dazzling golden monkeys came from the sunset mountains, hundreds of millions, tawny as a lion's mane, came from Mount Kailāsa, a thousand million who live on roots and fruits came from the Himālayas. Hundreds of millions came from the Vindhyas and they were as fierce as Mars and capable of terrible things. Countless numbers came from the shores of the Ocean of Milk where they dwelt in palm groves and lived on coconuts. The monkey forces came over the hills and the valleys and the rivers, drinking up the sun, as it were.

The swift-footed monkeys who had gone out as messengers returned first. Within an hour, they had come back to Sugrīva. They gave him the roots and fruits and rare medicinal herbs they had gathered on the way and said, 'We have been everywhere, to the mountains and the oceans and the forests, and all the monkeys are coming here in obedience to your commands!' Sugrīva was delighted and gladly accepted all the gifts they had brought him.

He dismissed the monkeys who had accomplished the task assigned to them, feeling sure that he and Rāma were well on their way to achieving their goal. 'Let us leave Kiṣkindha, if you are ready!' said Lakṣmaṇa politely. Sugrīva agreed and sent Tārā and the other women away.

He called for his retainers in a loud voice, and those that were allowed into the presence of the royal women came quickly and stood with their palms joined. Their king, who shone like the sun, told them to prepare his palanquin. Lakṣmaṇa and Sugrīva climbed into that golden vehicle which shone like the sun. It was a joy to behold

and was carried by a group of exceptionally strong monkeys. Surrounded by hundreds of fierce monkeys who were armed with all kinds of weapons, Sugrīva went to see Rāma.

He dismounted and approached Rāma with his palms joined and the other monkeys did the same. Rāma saw the huge army of monkeys which looked like a pool of lotuses and was very pleased with Sugrīva. He raised the king of the monkeys who had prostrated himself at his feet and embraced him with affection and regard.

He asked Sugrīva to sit down and then he said, 'A true king is one who divides his time proportionately between the affairs of the state and pleasure. He who pursues only pleasure and neglects *dharma* and material gain is like a man who goes to sleep in a tree and wakes only when he has fallen out of it. A king who destroys his enemies and is devoted to the welfare of his friends enjoys the fruits of all three goals of life. He lives in accordance with *dharma*. The time to begin our enterprise has arrived, destroyer of enemies! Now confer with your ministers and advisors!'

'It is thanks to you that I have been restored to fame and glory and have regained the ancient kingdom of the monkeys!' said Sugrīva. 'You and your mighty brother helped me achieve this. And he who does not repay a kindness is the worst of men.

'Here are hundreds of monkeys who have brought thousands of other monkeys with them from the ends of the earth. There are bears and fierce cow-tailed monkeys who know their way through the most impenetrable forests. Monkeys who are the sons of gods and *gandharvas* and who can change their shapes at will are coming with

their huge armies. Monkeys whose valour compares with Indra's, monkeys who live in the Vindhyas and are the size of the mountains Meru and Mandara, hundreds of thousands of millions of monkeys are on their way here! They will kill Rāvaṇa and his family and bring Sītā back to you!'

Rāma's eyes grew wide in astonishment, like a blooming lotus, when he saw the size of the expeditionary force that Sugrīva had gathered and he was very pleased.

At that very moment, a huge cloud of dust arose which blotted out the sharp, hot rays of the sun. It covered the sky and obscured the directions. The ground began to shake. The entire surface of the earth was covered with countless numbers of immensely strong monkeys, large as mountains, with sharp teeth and nails. In a matter of minutes, the area was overrun with monkey chiefs and their millions of followers, all of whom could change form at will. There were powerful, mighty monkeys from the rivers, seas and mountains as well as those who lived in forests and had voices that rumbled like thunder. The monkeys from all over the earth came there, shouting and roaring, leaping and jumping, and they surrounded Sugrīva the way clouds surround the sun. In their excitement, the monkeys made a terrible din. They bowed their heads to Sugrīva and introduced themselves. Other monkey chiefs were more restrained and they came up to Sugrīva and stood quietly with their palms joined. And Sugrīva, who knew *dharma*, introduced them all to Rāma.

fifteen

Sugrīva, the king of the monkeys, had a great many resources at his disposal. He said to Rāma, the tormentor of his enemies, 'All these powerful monkeys live under my jurisdiction and they can all change their shapes at will. Fierce monkey chiefs have come here with their troops whose courageous exploits have made them feared for their valour. Famous for their strength, they never tire. They can move through mountains and forests and waters with equal facility. Countless in number, they are all at your service. They are loyal and enthusiastic and devoted to the well-being of their master. They will do anything you ask, Rāma! The time has come for us to set out on our expedition. This army is under your command. Instruct it as you wish. I know well what has to be done now, but it is for you to issue orders!'

Rāma embraced Sugrīva and said, 'My dear friend, let them find out if Sītā is alive and let them locate the place where Rāvaṇa lives. When they have done that, I will confer with you and decide what should be done next. But it is not for either Lakṣmaṇa or me to direct this enterprise, you should be the one to do it, king of the monkeys! You know what needs to be done, you are my well-wisher and friend. You are devoted to our cause, you are brave and wise and know the appropriate time to act.'

Sugrīva summoned the monkey chief named Vinata and in the presence of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, addressed him in a voice like thunder. 'Take with you the monkeys that resemble the sun and the moon in their splendour, the ones who know what is suitable for time and place and those who are expedient at completing a task. Take hundreds of thousands of these swift monkeys and go to the hills, forests and rivers of the eastern regions and look for Sītā and for Rāvaṇa's home there.

'Go to the lovely rivers Bhāgīrathī, Sarayū and Kauśikī, to the Yamunā and the mountains in which it rises, to the Sarasvatī, the Sindhu, the Soṇā with its water that sparkles like jewels, to the Mahī and the Kālamahī with their hilly and wooded banks. Search in the kingdoms of Brahmamālā, Mālava, Kosalā, Kāśi, in Magadha's great villages, and in Puṇḍra and Anga. Look in the regions where the silk worm is bred and where silver is mined.

'Look in the hills of Mandara, where there are people with ears that cover their bodies, and people with ears that hang below their lips, and people whose faces seem to be made of iron, people who move quickly on one leg and people who eat the flesh of men. Look where the beautiful golden-skinned hunters with ornaments in their ears live, and where the island people who hunt and eat raw fish live. And among those who live under water and are known as human tigers. Search the hills and the forests there.

'Go to the places that can only be reached by jumping over hills and seas, until you come to the island of Yavadvīpa with its seven kingdoms, where gold and silver is mined. Go beyond Yavadvīpa until you come to the

winter mountain Śiśira, whose peaks touch the heavens. Gods and *dānavas* live there. Look among its inaccessible peaks and forests.

'Look for Rāvaṇa and Sītā among the terrifying islands of the ocean. There are enormous *asuras* there who have been hungry for centuries. They catch creatures by their shadows and eat them, for Brahmā has allowed them to do so. Then you will come to the shores of a mighty ocean whose waters are dark as clouds and which rumble like thunder. It is filled with sea serpents. After that, you will see the blood-red waters of the ocean called Lohita. There, you will find Garuḍa's home, studded with jewels, large as Mount Kailāsa, that was built by Viśvakarmā.

'You will see the fierce *rākṣasas* called Mandehas who are as huge as boulders and have many frightening forms, hanging upside down from mountain peaks. Burned by the heat of the sun, every day they fall into the ocean and then they hang upside down again. Then you will see an uncrossable ocean, white as a cloud, known as the Ocean of Milk, its waves like a garland of pearls. In the middle of it, you will find the mountain Ṛṣabha surrounded by trees that flower with a celestial fragrance. After that, you will see the lake Sudarśana, covered with gleaming lotuses which have gold filaments, where swans come to play. *Cāraṇas*, *yakṣas*, *kinnaras* and hosts of *apsarases* come to that lotus lake to enjoy themselves.

'And when you have passed beyond the Ocean of Milk, you will come to the greatest ocean of them all, the ocean of pure water, that inspires dread in the hearts of all beings. It is there that the fiery creature, the horse-faced child of anger, was placed. It is said that those swift waters and all

moving and unmoving things will be consumed by that fire at the end of time. The sound you hear there is the wailing of the creatures of the deep, for they cannot bear to look upon that horse-faced being.

'On the far side of the ocean, at a distance of thirty *yojanās*, there is a golden mountain called Jātarūpa. Sitting on its summit, is a serpent with a thousand heads. The god Ananta, honoured by all beings, sits on it. A golden, triple-headed palm tree, the flagstaff of the deity, rests on the crest of the mountain. Beyond that is the mountain of the rising sun. Its summit ridge touches the heavens and is more than a hundred *yojanās* long. Made of pure gold, it dazzles the eyes. There are all kinds of trees on it, golden and as bright as the sun itself.

'There is a golden peak on that ridge, one *yojanā* high and ten *yojanās* long, called Saumanasa. It was there that Viṣṇu took his first step in his dwarf incarnation, before he took his second step by placing his foot on the top of Mount Meru. The sun travels along the northern edge of Jambūdvīpa and is visible to the people who live there in all its glory. The great *ṛṣis*, the Vālakhilyas and the Vaikhānasas live there, blazing like the sun and practising their austerities.

'Look carefully for Rāvaṇa and Sītā among those peaks and forests. Look there and in all the places I have not mentioned. Nobody can go further east than that, because beyond is the region where the gods live. Because there is no sun and moon there, the region is covered in darkness. Monkeys can go no further than this because there is neither the sun nor anything familiar, and we do not know what lies ahead.

'Go and find Sītā, and Rāvaṇa's home, and having reached the mountain of the rising sun, return here within a month!'

Sugrīva prepared a band of monkeys to go south. Nīla, the son of Agni, Hanumān, the mighty Jāmbavān, son of Brahmā, and several others were placed under the command of valiant Angada.

'Go to the thousand-peaked Vindhya mountain, covered with different kinds of trees, and search in the river Narmadā which is hard to cross and is filled with water serpents, and in the beautiful Godāvarī and the long and winding Kṛṣṇaveṇī. Look through Mekhalā and Utkalā and the cities of Darśana, Aśvavantī and Avantī. Search Vidarbhā, Ṛṣika and the pleasant Māhiṣaka and Banga, Kalinga and Kauśika thoroughly.

'Then scour the Daṇḍaka forest with its hills and rivers and caves. And then the regions of Andhra, Puṇḍra, Chola and Kerala until you come to the Ayomukha mountain that abounds in ore. It is a glorious mountain with its flowering trees and sandalwood groves. Search it thoroughly. Then you shall come upon the celestial stream, the beautiful, clear Kāverī, where the *apsarases* love to play. On top of the Malaya mountain, you will find the *ṛṣi* Agastya, blazing like the morning sun. With his blessings and permission, you can go further and cross the river Tāmraparṇī, filled with crocodiles. The river is hidden by a belt of sandalwood trees and is dotted with islands. It makes its way to the sea like a young girl rushing to her lover.

'Then you will come to the golden walls that guard the Pāṇḍya kingdom, decorated with pearls and other gems.

When you reach the ocean, you shall have to decide what to do next. Mount Mahendra, golden and made beautiful by its trees and forests, is on those shores, placed there by Agastya. It has every kind of tree and creeper and the gods, *ṛṣis*, *yakṣas*, and *apsarases* like to spend time there. Indra comes there at every new moon and the *siddhas* and *cāraṇas* also enjoy it immensely.

'On the far shore of the ocean there is a bright and shining island that is closed to mortals. You must search there very carefully for Sītā. That is where the wicked *rākṣasa* Rāvaṇa, who deserves to die, lives, equal to Indra in his splendour. And in the middle of that southern ocean lives a *rākṣasī* named Angārakā who grabs the shadows of her prey and then eats them.

'One hundred *yojanās* beyond that, further out into the ocean, lies the mountain Puṣpitaka where the *siddhas* and *cāraṇas* come. Bright as the sun and the moon, surrounded by the ocean on all sides, its lofty peaks seem to touch the sky. The sun shines on one of its peaks, turning it gold, and the moon shines on the other, turning it silver. The cruel, the ungrateful and the non-believers cannot see it, but you should honour it by bowing before it, monkeys!

'Fourteen *yojanās* beyond that, on a path that is rough and inaccessible, is the Suryavān mountain. And when you have crossed that, you will find Mount Vaidyuta, where the trees flower in all seasons and you can find any fruit that you could wish for. Eat your fill there of those excellent roots and fruits and drink that honey before you go on your way.

'Then you will come to Mount Kunjara, which delights the mind and the eye. Viśvakarmā built a home there for

Agastya, which is one *yojanā* wide and ten *yojanās* long, made of gold and adorned with celestial jewels. Go to the city of Bhogavatī, home of the mighty serpents. It is surrounded on all sides by fierce and poisonous snakes with sharp fangs and so it is hard to reach. Search carefully in that city which is ruled by the king of the serpents, Vāsuki.

'When you pass beyond Bhogavatī, you will come to a huge mountain shaped like a bull called Mount Ṛṣabha, studded with jewels. Sandal trees that provide pastes of all colours, yellow, red and dark brown, grow there. If you see them, do not touch them, for those forests are guarded by the fierce *gandharva* Rohita. Five *gandharva* kings live there and each of them is as bright as the sun.

'Beyond that lies an inaccessible path that leads to the realm of those enlightened beings who have won a life in heaven. And beyond that, still further, is the realm of the ancestors, the capital city of Yama, the god of death, shrouded in impenetrable darkness. You can go no further than that, monkeys. Explore all the places I have mentioned and any others that you see. Bring back information about Sītā. Whichever one of you returns within a month and says, "I have seen Sītā!" shall get riches equal to my own and will be able to live in comfort. He will be my dearest friend, dearer even than my own life, even if he has harmed me in the past.

'You are all immeasurably strong and brave. You are nobly born and virtuous. Spare no effort in your search for Sītā!'

Sugrīva summoned Suṣeṇa, the mighty monkey chief who was Tārā's father. He joined his palms and bowed to

him and addressed him with respect.

'With two hundred thousand monkeys, my dear, go and search the western regions.

'Go to Surāṣṭra, Bāhlika, Sura and Bhīma. Search in the delightful countryside and in the big cities, in all the forests and the groves, in the cool and swiftly flowing streams, in the forests where the ascetics live and in the wooded hills. When you have searched the western region that is circled by mountains, you will come to the western ocean which is filled with fish and other water creatures. The monkeys will be happy when they find themselves in groves of coconut and date palms.

'Look for Sītā and for Rāvaṇa's home in Marīcipaṭṭanam and in the pleasant Jātipura, in Avantī and Angalopā in the dense forests, the kingdoms and the coastal cities. At the point where the river Sindhu flows into the sea, there is an enormous mountain with a hundred peaks, covered with trees. It is called Hemagiri. There are winged lions that live on its slopes and they carry off fish and other water creatures and elephants to their nests. The monkeys who can take any form at will should search this sky-touching mountain with its varied trees carefully.

'The monkeys will see the peaks of the golden mountain Pāriyātra, which is not normally visible, standing out from the ocean. Hundreds of thousands of *gandharvas* live there. They are fierce and as bright as the fire, and they can take any form they choose. The monkeys, even though they are strong and brave, should not go too close to them, nor should they take any fruit from this region. The *gandharvas* are very powerful and courageous and they guard their roots and fruits zealously. Make every effort to find Sītā

there and you will have nothing to fear from the *gandharvas* if you behave like monkeys.

'Mount Cakravān occupies about a quarter of that ocean and that is where Viśvakarmā made the disc with a thousand spokes. Viṣṇu killed Pancajana and the *dānava* Hayagrīva there and took the disc and the conch shell from them. Look for Sītā and Rāvaṇa on the broad slopes and deep caves of that mountain.

'In that immeasurably deep ocean stands Mount Varāha, sixty-four *yojanās* high with golden peaks. There is a golden city there called Prāgjyotiśa and the wicked *dānava* Naraka lives there. Look for Sītā and Rāvaṇa on the broad slopes and deep caves of that mountain.

'When you have passed that, you will see a mountain made entirely of gold. Even the insides of its caves and the water that flows from them is gold. Lions and tigers and elephants and boar roar and bellow all the time, taking pride in their own voices. Indra, whose horses are black, was crowned king by the gods on that mountain and it is called Meghavān.

'When you have passed that mountain which is protected by Indra, go to the sixty thousand golden hills that shine like the rising sun and are covered with flowering trees that glow golden. In the middle of them is the king, the best of all mountains, Mount Meru. Long ago, the sun god was pleased with the mountain and gave it a boon. "Whoever comes to you, by day or night, shall be turned into gold by my grace. The gods and the *gandharvas* and *dānavas* that live here shall glow golden and shall be devoted to me!" The gods go to Mount Meru every evening to worship the sun and the sun, after he has received their

worship, goes to the mountain behind which he sets and becomes invisible to all creatures. The sun travels ten thousand *yojanās* in half an hour and reaches the top of the mountain.

'There is a huge, shining mansion on its peak that was built by Viśvakarmā. It is surrounded by trees, and birds of all kinds gather there. That is the home of the great-souled Varuṇa, who carries the noose. Look for Sītā and Rāvaṇa in those lakes and rivers that are hard to access. The great sage Merusavarṇi lives there. This righteous sage is Brahmā's equal and he glows with his own splendour. Prostrate yourselves before him and ask him where Sītā is.

'When the night is over, the sun lights up the world of living beings by passing from the mountain of the rising sun to the mountain where it sets. Beyond this, it is not possible to go, best of monkeys. Beyond this there is no sun and nothing familiar. Go up to the mountain of the setting sun to look for Sītā and for Rāvaṇa's home and return here within a month. If you do not, I will have to punish you.

'My valiant father-in-law, Suṣeṇa, is going with you. Listen to what he says and obey him at all times. This mighty one is my teacher and mentor. I know that you are all brave and strong and capable of acting by yourselves. But you must search the western region under his direction. When you have found Rāma's wife, we shall have repaid our debt for the favour that he did us.'

Sugrīva then summoned the powerful chief Śatabali. 'Take hundreds of thousands of monkeys who are your equals in valour and your ministers and explore the northern region which has Mount Himavān as its crest.

Look there for Rāma's blameless wife. When we have accomplished this task, we shall have done what Rāma wants and in doing so, we will have freed ourselves from debt and will have achieved our dearest goal.

'Search the regions of the Mlecchas, of the Pulindas and Sūrasena, the countries of the Prasthalas, the Bharatas, the Kurus, the Madras, the Kambhojas and the Yavanas. Search the coastal lands of the Śākas, the kingdoms of the Bāhlikas, Ṛṣikas, Pauravas and the Ṭankaṇas. Look in China and the regions beyond China, in Nihāra, Daradā and in the Himālayas, among the forests and groves.

'Go to Somāśrama, where the gods and *gandharvas* play and then on to the golden-peaked Mount Kāla. Look for Sītā in the caves and crevices of that mountain. Crossing over that, you will come to Mount Sudarśana whose insides consist entirely of gold. Look in those forests and streams and caves for Sītā and Rāvaṇa. One hundred *yojanās* from there is a barren waste, with no mountains, trees or rivers and no form of life. Pass through that awful place quickly and make for the white Mount Kailāsa which will bring you great happiness. Kubera's home, white as a cloud and decorated with gold, is situated there. Viśvakarmā built it for him. There is a beautiful pool in his gardens, filled with lotuses and lilies, where hordes of lovely *apsarases* come to play. Kubera, the god of wealth and the king of the *yakṣas* lives there happily with his *guhyakas*, honoured by all beings. Look for Rāvaṇa and Sītā in those moonlit hills, forests and caves.

'Go carefully into the caves of Mount Kraunca, for they are hard to access and entry into them is not easy. Great celestial sages who shine like the sun live there and even

the gods worship them. Search through the peaks and valleys and slopes and caves of this mountain. Look especially carefully on the main peak of the Kraunca mountain as well as on the next mountain which is treeless and on Mount Mānasa, the home of the birds. No beings, not even the gods, *dānavas* and *rākṣasas* can go there, but you should explore the area carefully.

'After you have crossed Mount Kraunca, you will come to the mountain named Mainaka where the *asura* Maya lives, in a home that he built himself. Search on the slopes of the mountain and in its caves and in the homes of the horse-faced women who live there, wherever those homes may be. Beyond that lies the region in which the *siddhas* and the Vālakhilyas and the Vaikhānasas live in their hermitages, practising austerities. Honour them, for their austerities have made them pure and given them magical powers. Ask them for news of Sītā. Lake Vaikhānasa is covered with lotuses and sun-bright swans play in its waters. The elephant Sarvabhauma, Kubera's mount, wanders in that region with his mates.

'Beyond that lies a region that has neither sun nor moon nor stars, that has neither beginning nor end. But it is illuminated by the god-like people who live there. They have won magical powers and the ability to illuminate themselves by the practise of austerities and they enjoy their leisure in that place. Then you will come to the river Śailoda with its banks of bamboo. These bamboos carry the *siddhas* to the other side of the river and back. Thousands of streams run there, fed by pools with golden lotuses which have petals the colour of lapis. There are huge bodies of water there, covered with lotuses, some

the colour of blood, some gold, and some bright as the rising sun. All over the area, there are fields of bright lilies the colour of sapphire with filaments of shining gold. The river banks spill the roundest pearls and the rarest gems of every kind. The mountains there blaze like fire. Made primarily of gold, they are filled with gems and jewels.

'The divinely scented trees have fruits and flowers all year round. They fulfil all your wishes and even to touch them is to experience heaven. There are other trees there that produce clothes adorned with pearls and lapis for men and women. There are others that produce golden couches, exquisitely worked and beyond price. Still others produce flowers that have never been seen before and the finest food and drink, even young and lovely women whose charms are irresistible. *Gandharvas*, *kinnaras*, *siddhas*, *nāgas* and *vidyādharas*, bright as the sun, seek their pleasures there with their women. The air is always filled with music and song and laughter that delights the hearts of all creatures. There is no one there who is unhappy, nor anyone who is without his beloved and each day their pleasures and happiness increases.

'Beyond this region lies the northern ocean in the middle of which stands the great golden mountain Somagiri. Those who go to the realms of Indra and Brahmā and the world of the gods can see that king of mountains. Even though the region is sunless, it is lit up by the glow of the mountain. Brahmā, the soul of the universe, lives here, waited on by *ṛṣis*.

'You must not go beyond the Kurus for any reason whatsoever for the regions beyond are closed to all creatures. Even the gods cannot go beyond Somagiri. Take

a look at it and return as quickly as you can. The monkeys can go no further than this. Beyond this there is no sun and nothing familiar. Search in all the places that I have mentioned and also in the places that I have not, as you think best.

'You are like the wind and the fire. When you have accomplished your goal and found Sītā, you will have pleased Rāma, the son of Daśaratha, and gratified me even more! And when you have done that, you will be free to go wherever you want with your families and loved ones. You can seek your pleasure, for I will have honoured you and placed infinite resources at your disposal!'

Sugrīva had a special message for Hanumān because he felt sure that of all the monkeys, he was the one most likely to be successful. 'Not on earth or in the sky, not in the heavens or the abode of the gods, nor in the waters is there anyone to rival your skills, bull among monkeys! You know all the worlds with their oceans and mountains. You know all the gods, the *gandharvas*, *asuras* and *nāgas* who inhabit them. Mighty monkey, your speed, power, energy and splendour can be compared only to your father's, the wind god's! There is no creature on earth who is your equal and so I look to you to find Sītā. I find strength and wisdom, courage, knowledge of place and time, as well as familiarity with modes of diplomacy and negotiation in you alone!'

Rāma understood Hanumān's unique gifts and realized that he was particularly well equipped to make the mission a success. He thought to himself, 'The king of the monkeys clearly feels that Hanumān is the most likely to succeed and so I, too, must assume that he is the most capable of

all. He must have proved his capacities by his past achievements for his master to have singled him out like this!'

Rāma gazed at the enterprising monkey with deep satisfaction and felt as if his ends had already been achieved. He gave Hanumān his signet ring with his name engraved upon it so that Sītā would recognize him as a messenger from Rāma. 'By this sign, best of monkeys, Sītā will know that you have come from me and will receive you without fear. Your visible energy, spirit and valour, as well as Sugrīva's words indicate to me that you shall be successful!'

The great monkey took the ring and honoured it by placing it upon his head. Then he touched Rāma's feet and joined his palms and set off on his journey. At the head of the monkey army, Hanumān, son of the Wind, looked like the moon surrounded by stars in a cloudless sky. 'Son of the Wind, with your strength and courage that rivals a lion's, I depend on you to find Sītā!' said Rāma.